



でん ばおんな せいしゅんおとこ
電波女と青春男③

えーと今度はなんなんだろう。

とっても電波な女の子・藤和エリオの
前に鎮座^{ちんざ}ましますは、宇宙服を着込んだ
謎の少女（たぶん。声色で判断）。

ヤシロと名乗るその宇宙服女は、「この星には観光ではなくビジネスで来た」とかなんとか言って、俺たちの行く先々に登場してくる。まさか、宇宙人が見守る街で『未知との遭遇』をした……のか？
えー、前川^{まえかわ}さんと野球したり、リュウシさんのバスケ観たり、いろいろやることあるのになあ……。エリオと過ごす今年の夏は、退屈なんて感じなさそうだな。

……ささやかにお届けする青春ラブコメ、なのかなあ、これ？



人間人間
イラスト・ブリキ

Novel Illustrations

い-9-12



電波女と青春男 ③

人間人間

電撃文庫 ㊦

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いるまひとま
人間人間

久しぶりの外出は眩しかった。

【電撃文庫作品】

嘘つきみーくんと壊れたまーちゃん1～8、『i』
電波女と青春男①～③

イラスト：プリキ

最近、住まいを関西に移しまして、心も新たに頑張っております！

カバー／脱印刷

電波女と 青春男 3



人間人間
イラスト＋ブリキ

従船済み (ミフネリヨウニ)

- 同級生。
- 転校して最初の友達。
- 俺の青春ポイントの上昇要因。
- 自転車に乗る際には黄色いヘルメットを被ってる。
- 髪がくせ毛なところを気にしてるよう。
- 性格は若干天然だった、普通の人。
- 気軽に話しかけられる存在で、やつは大切です。
- 「今年の夏」は、バスケの試合をがんばるんだってさ。

「楽しい夏休みにしようね、にわ君」

前川さん (マエカワサン)

- 同級生。でも下の名前が分からない。
- 俺の青春ポイントの上昇要因。
- 身長は180cmくらいある。体格は針金と勝負できるくらいの細身。
- コスプレ趣味がある。制服とか着ぐるみとか。
- 淡々とした口調で大胆に提案してくる。
- その外見も相まって、前川さんのペースにいつもなるんだよね……。
- 「今年の夏」は、早朝草野球をがんばるんだってさ(コスプレで)。

「やーやー、教師の長話には前川さんと
定評のある私が帰ってきたよ。
また少し三平規管が本調子じゃないけど」

謎の宇宙服風少女

(ナゾノ ウチュウフクフウ ショウジョ)

- 宇宙服を着た人、略して宇宙人。
- 俺の青春ポイントの……なんだ、不確定要因？
- 神出鬼没だが、軒下が好きらしい。
- エリオを同類扱いして、追いかけて回しているみたいだ。
- 「この星には観光じゃなくビジネスで来た」らしいけど、そういう問題か？
- なんで「ショウジョ」と分かったかという……まあご一読あれ。
- 「今年の夏」は、こいつ、なにをがんばるんだ？

「ワ タ シ ハ ウ チュー ジ ン ダ。

ソ イ ツ ヲ ヨ コ セ。

ナ ゼ コ ノ ホ シ ニ イ ル ノ カ

キョー ミ ガ ア ル」





丹羽 真 (ニワ マコト)

- 自称、俺。
- 身長は170cmちょい。
- 田舎生活を経て、都会暮らしに。華の高校生活エンジョイ中？
- 青春ポイント獲得に命をかけている。
- 前回にひきつづき、今回もポイントがとんでもないことに。
- 『今年の夏』は、予定がてんこもり。退屈しなくてすみそうだなあ。

「イトコ、星……」

藤和エリオ (トウワ エリオ)

- 元・布団ぐーぐるる童少女。
- 俺の青春ポイントの低下要因、だったんだけど……。
- 身長は160cmくらい(おそろく)。体格は少し痩せ気味。
- 日光に当たらない所なので肌は透く白。
- 髪は伸ばしっぱなしで、色がそのまんま宇宙人っぽい。
- 脱布団以降、サッパリ感情が豊かになったような気がする。
- でもずーっと、裸足。
- 『今年の夏』は、『イトコと一緒に天体観測』をがんばるんだってさ。

「はい、大至急務めさせて頂きたい
所存ではありますが……」

「いい、エリオ。これからはね、鏡を毎日見る生活をしなさい。
そうしたら貴女は、
もっとたくさんの人に
好きになって貰えるから」

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藤和女々 (トウワ メメ)

- 叔母。年齢は三十九歳……だったが、めでたく誕生日を迎えました。
- 真夏はノースリーブのシャツに短パン。歳を考えると思わなくもない露出である。
- いつも笑って、深く考えているようで何も考えていない。
- ぜったい大人じゃないよな、この人……。
- 『今年の夏』は、女々さん曰く「マコ君と夏祭りを巡って幻想的な橙色に染まる夜道を連れ添って
うふふチョコバナナうふふ綿飴うふふ(強制終了)」

電波女と
青春男
3

Prologue - Summer This Year

This special sense of relief is universal to any school — actually, it's probably true for the entire nation.

Then according to the same train of thought, the end of semester ceremony must be the most exciting aspect to a student's life. Whether good or bad, the final exams are over, and we already know the results: nothing could possibly shackle the anticipation of students. Personally, it is as thrilling as extracurricular activities. From the standpoint of Youth-points, school festival is one of the three most prominent school events; unfortunately, it is unclear how this school think. Is it enthusiastic? Or indifferent?

Apparently, the school festival is usually held in early October before the tiger of autumn loosen its grips. I am looking forward to it — I so concluded while glancing about. After the teacher had finished lecturing, noise filled the class. Students were among their circles and chatting away fervently. About twenty percent of the class immediately vanished from the class; the rest bathed in the relaxation after the teacher's departure, forming some sort of sense of festivity.

An atmosphere that's like during the preparation phase of a school festival — I don't dislike it, for it is the incubator of Youth-points. My previous school had an obligatory attitude — or rather, a trend of distaste for any zealous behaviour — and hence had a boring event. There were probably five different stands and everyone just lazed around in the empty classrooms and hoped that the end would come sooner.

If possible, I wish my class this year would welcome the festival with more unity.

...My reverie gradually faded. About time to refocus back to onto summer.

Okay, since we are on the topic of Niwa Makoto, me, who dawdled in this yet-to-be-silent class.

I don't actually belong to any circles.

“Man~ It's the summer~ I was so excited I didn't sleep well last night!”

Eheheheh, the expectedly delightful normal human— I mean, classmate — with a bashful smile, is our well-known Mifune Ryuushi-san. After the lecture was over, she came to my seat, where we traded the flowers of words. Since it was the first semester I spent here, I decided to give one Youth-point accordingly to this particular exchange.

Swarms of cicadas cried on the trees outside. If they were kids, it'd probably be a case of abuse— and I'll contact the respective organization. To be honest, even if they are just cicadas, it's still loud enough for me to want to report them. Undisturbed by the cicadas, Ryuushi-san sat in front of me with the same smile.

“Hey~ Niwa-kun, do ya have your phone today?”

Ryuushi-san flipped through the backpack placed on my desk and retrieved her phone. The neon-pink cell phone that she so proudly displayed deflected the burning sunlight into my face.

“I do.”

Even though it rarely has the chance to play its ringtone. Must be because I'm so clumsy with it, hahahah (don't wanna admit it). No, but I still get those ridiculous newly-wed mails from Meme-san.

I'm at the age and position to give up on all sorts of points when it comes to that person.

A frigid wind contrary to the heat outside engulfed my heart. I took the cell phone out. Ryuushi-san, in her summer uniform, stared my hand and nodded confirmingly. “Mm.”

“Let's trade numbers and mail address~”

The phone, a cute key chain with what looks like a pig mascot of a restaurant, and a cute— uh, mouse, accessory shook with Ryuushi-san's hand. I don't want to anger a certain world-famous Mr. Mouse by giving a thorough description. I'll shoulder the pain alone. In any case, that's not the important thing here. ^[1])

“Let’s do it.” I naturally agreed without another word.

That reminds me: I was going to exchange number with Ryuushi-san when she visited me in the hospital during early May. The eggplant came at the last moment, though, so it never happened.

As a side note, the eggplant is also known as our classmate Maekawa-san. If you don’t know who that is, please go back and re-read. Just for your information, she can even turn into a dango. Most people tend to mistake her for a voracious Bake-danuki that could shapeshift.^[2]

Regarding Maekawa-san, she fainted in the gym today from anaemia. “It’s nothing~ It happens all the time during summer.” Apparently she stoutly stated so with a grin on her face as she was carried away into the infirmary. As for those around her, we once again were forced to choose an attitude between ‘shock’ and ‘unbearable.’

“Beep beep~” Ryuushi-san hummed the sound effects as she entered the numbers I gave. After about two seconds, my phone rung with a high-pitched, monotonous buzz. An unregistered number of a classmate/high school girl showed up on the plasma display. Candy to my eyes.

“Mm, mm.” Ryuushi-san, who induced the ringing, seemed pleased as well.

“What is it?”

“Looks like ya didn’t give a fake number.”

“Cough!” I almost choked from her cuteness. Under what kind of circumstance would anyone lie about this? I thought.

We traded mail address as well. Looks like her phone doesn’t support infrared. The first email she sent me was, ‘let’s have fun during the summer!’ It was a firework-esque service that signalled the beginning of a more exciting summer.

I only hope that it wasn’t some courtesy words.

With a genuine smile, I replied after a declaration.

“Ok, here it is!”

Just as I spoke, Ryuushi-san grabbed my phone. After checking the name I put

in, she smiled like she was about to reach into a bento with her chopsticks, and clicked on the screen.

“I told ya: call me Ryuuko~!”

“Beep, beep.” Once again she operated the phone with an animated voice, then she threw it back. The name has been corrected to ‘Ryuu’ko, all in emphatic parenthesis. “Phew~” Ryuushi-san breathed out and wiped away the non-existent sweat on her forehead.

Oh, I see.

“Ryuushi-san.”

“Hey! I said it’s Ryuuko!”

I like this reaction better though.

“It’s getting straight, your hair.”

“... Wuu~”

Ryuushi-san curled up to my comment. She pulled a binder poking out of the corner of her bag and tried to cover her hair clumsily.

“Wuu, don’t look~ ...Ah, I’m so sad.”

“I think straight hair is also good.” And it’s cute, too.

“That’s against the Ryuuko-san spirit. No straight hair, no reason. Curly is the best.”

“Oh...” A girl’s insistence on a style is hard to grasp for those around her, but it is not to be trivialized. I’ve learned to handle it, at least. But as for her passion for a certain diet... Hmm. During exam week, Ryuushi brought me to a buffet of fruits and vegetable. “Just leave it to me if you wanna get your mind off things!” I just can’t. For a person who had accepted ‘the modern way of eating is to stuff yourself with what you paid for,’ does this not qualify as a difficult challenge? I just can’t do it.

Faced with the joyous girl who easily devoured thirty or more cherry tomatoes, I reached my limit as I watched, with estranged eye, her nibble on an apple.

“Ahh~ Should I get it done~? But my wallet is like Australia now.” [3]

Uweh~ she comically lied on the desk with her legs out. I don't mind having a million of them stuck on me, as long as the flattened thing was this adorable girl. [4]

With off-topic thoughts, I smilingly watched her hair and fluffy face. Then, something drifted into the corner of my eyes. I casually turned over. People might think I've been waiting for a long time if I looked too over-the-top.

Coming from the infirmary, Maekawa-san had returned with a pale face... Nothing out of the ordinary, but somehow she was steaming today. Her general mien was like an icicle about to disappear amidst the heat and cicada cries of the summer.

She went by the health committee girl, probably to say thanks for when she passed out, before coming here. Now we have a circle... Not that it matters. So why is she here?

Becoming friends with Ryuushi-san and Maekawa-san might just be the greatest accomplishment I have this semester. My dazed mind carelessly summarised this past four months.

“Yo~ ‘Just call her when the teachers won't shut up’ Maekawa-san has made her return.”

True: when Maekawa-san was taken away, the assembly was adjourned. Not many teachers could continue once the students started complaining about the heat in the gym making someone pass out. After all, they still have to keep their reputation.

“Are you alright?”

“My balance isn't, but I am.”

As to her report, her steps were slightly awkward. Maekawa-san, with her eyes slightly bleary, lightly tightened her face muscle to display her usual cheeky smile.

“I'm apparently really good at heat conservation. Both sauna and a long bath are my arch nemesis.”

Is there a season that exists for her to be active? I noticed that despite looking feverish, Maekawa-san was not sweating. Besides her appearance and an interest in dressing up, Maekawa-san is kind of like an old, simple household electronic: concise and to the point.

If that's the case, her imposing height must exist solely for the purpose of intimidation, like a snake with aggressive camouflage. She's just standing next to me now, but her presence was still terrifying.

Like I'm about to be flooded by muddy water ready to burst.

On the other hand, Ryuushi-san reclaimed her posture and grin. Actually, she didn't look amused at all... Am I thinking too much? I had the feeling that it would be wise to pretend that it's all a mirage and the Tengu did it.^[5]

"What are you guys doing with your phone? Some new experiment? Or is it a certain ritual between only two people?"

Is there a rule that demands the people living in this town of the aliens to 'put what makes the most sense as the last explanation'?

"We're just exchanging numbers." Though a bit late for how long we've known each other.

"Oh— Then do it with me too."

Maekawa-san went back to her seat and took a blue phone out of her pack. For someone so tall, her hands aren't very wide — with something to compare to, I noticed that her fingers were very long; if it were put on someone's wrist, it would look like a silver handcuff that's enough to replace a bracelet.

I told her my number. "What an awkward number to have a mnemonic for." Maekawa-san so commented before calling the number. The same followed for the mail. In that mail address was the cosplayer name I heard on that one night. "Uu~" Then the slow and unenthusiastic Ryuushi-san exchanged number with her as well. Why was she so upset?

Though only for the day, I was drunk with the triumphant feeling of adding two girls' phone numbers into my contact list. This must be 'Youth-points, get!'^[6]

“Oh yeah, doesn’t Touwa have a cellphone or something?”

Sitting across from me, Maekawa-san queried while mindlessly playing on her phone.

“Um, well, I don't think so.” I could only reply so, being asked something I’ve never thought of.

She probably has her own signals though — I never said the joke out loud.

“Hoh~ That’s good.”

Ryuushi-san joined in as well. Is my thinking that it was spoken with relief just a maladjustment of ear drums? “Wu!” Realizing her blunder, Ryuushi-san swapped on a serious look. “That doesn’t count! The meanie Ryuuko doesn’t count! Forget the past now~!” Then she swung her hands above my head as though severing something connecting to it. Can Ryuushi-san see those marshmallow-like chat bubbles? Well, I didn’t actually think much of what she said.

“Sure is tough for you too, Ryuushi.”

With an understanding — or rather, onlooking — angle, Maekawa-san remarked on Ryuushi-san’s attitude; she even bit down slightly on her lower lip so she wouldn’t crack up.

“...I told ya, it’s Ryuuko.” Even that familiar phrase sounded lethargic.

“Could it be that for an athlete like yourself, you are even more motivated when there’s a challenge?”

“W-w-what are you talking about! Ah, I mean! Whatta ya on about~!”

Ryuushi-san flustered to Maekawa-san’s teasing words. She kicked the chair down with the back of her knees, standing on her toes as if challenging Maekawa-san. Neither of them seemed too firm though. More so with Maekawa-san, who, despite standing still, seemed lopsided.

On the other hand, I... Well, I thought they’re discussing something that I have no say in. It’s got the kind of ‘the hell you know about this?’ feeling.

Anyway, being sequestered, I shifted my attention back onto the cries of cicadas. I decided that imagining things would be the only thing to do.

How about Ryuushi-san's rival? For example, his name would be Shi-ryuu. Something that sounds like a minor character from a fighting manga. He's about as strong as Ryuushi-san... No go? I guess not since Ryuushi-san seemed to be just a bench warmer.^[7]

"He's a tough one to crack. It will be like Ak*gi VS K*wata! And since it's the summer, the time you spent with him will be a lot more! It's gonna be very one-sided!"^[8]

Some such conversation occurred on the side. Looks like Maekawa-san was still provoking Ryuushi-san.

"Wuu~! How dare you tease your elder, Maekawa-san! Explain yourself!"

"Elder? You?" The tilted head of Maekawa-san suggested that she probably thought of the opposite.^[9]

"Yes, I'm already seventeen as of last month! What about you?"

"I'll be nice and tell you: I'm a March baby."

For some reason she stuck her chest out with arms akimbo. Ryuushi-san, too, realizing her age superiority, humphed twice smugly and raised her head... As the saying goes, gentleness is strength: Ryuushi-san emerged victorious. The world is certainly enigmatic. Both my eyes were locked onto the mystery that is adolescence. If you know what I mean.

If I have to express it with a word, it'd be 'dream.' The type that all healthy guy of this time and age think of.

Also, my birthday is the tenth of October. Not that anyone would care.

Watching the discourse, or rather, dissent of these two, I defused the situation by suggesting to Ryuushi-san, 'we should head home soon,' and leaving the room. As I exited, I felt the guys' glares of resentment stabbing my back; I, however, didn't look back. I merely immersed myself in the sense of superiority as I headed out.

Out in the hall wasn't the mere level of 'the sun is here,' but a full-on fire-ablaze. Just being close to the window was enough to roast, and even my hair seemed to be singed.

I like it, for it is a complete, hardcore summer. Maybe because it's also a break, summer has always been more filled with hope than the other seasons. The atmosphere of summer holds something that speaks to the heart: it is the season that is most suited to be a painting, when walking alone under the sky — could I be the only one with such thoughts?

As we left the shoe lockers, I thought maybe Maekawa-san will pass out again. It must have been terrible for her when she's young, having such a physique. She might be safer if she kept herself in a pool at all time.

Speaking of pool, the school doesn't have a swim team. Apparently during summer the pool is open for other clubs' members. I heard that there are a lot of people who would only leave school after taking a dip in the pool (according to Ryuushi-san). I've even heard that the pool would be split in half, and the girls and guys would swim in their designated areas, like a bath. At least I know the guys are using the pool for something besides to relax.

We ducked into the parking lot's roofing to escape the boiling heat. Once inside the shade, the smell of burning and dryness became more evident; because the temperature never dropped, it was even more unpleasant.

After taking her bike out, Maekawa-san shrugged and spoke.

“Unfortunately, something or someone has disallowed me to go home with the transfer student today.”

With a smirk, she stared provocatively at Ryuushi-san, who's about to put on her safety helmet, while declaring her dubious intention. But no one ever said anything about going home with her.

The self-proclaimed elder was once again annoyed. From the sideline, I don't know how angry she really was, but this kind of 'pouty hmph-hmph' actually eases me. Rather than being displeasing, the bickering put a smile on my face.

Ahh~~ I want to poke her face. Stealing glances from her charming face, I held my fist tightly.

We finally split with Maekawa-san after leaving the school entrance. Direction-wise, that's the 'shopping district' side. The town we live in has a rapidly-developing city side, and the olden shopping district. Between these two

is a subtle ‘wall’ — someone from a while ago explained to me. I’ve also heard that the general sentiment of the city is that it seems to treat the shopping district as the town’s disgrace for no particular reason. Apparently Maekawa-san has an odd position because though she lives in the city parts, her parents run a pub in the shopping districts. As a side note, Ryuushi-san is purely city.

Ryuushi-san and I both rode along the sides of the road. Clank clank, the wheels spun. Every time when the tires cross with the road, the smell of burning rubber would pester my nose. Maybe the tires did actually melt from the heat of the cement.

“It really feels like summer is finally here when school’s out.”

“Hm. And it’s like, ‘how long till the end of August?’ at first, and suddenly it’s ending when you did a whole lot of nothing.”

It’s been like that every year. At most I go to the festival briefly or go visit my grandparents — I was just moving out of obligation, as opposed to free will. All exchanges worthy of points that are rare in school life have been completely cut off. For Youth-points, summer was a drought.

But I suspect this is just ‘up to this point.’ It’s going to be different this year. I think.

“I got club and stuff though. Mm, yes, I’m very different from those people who have nothing to do all day and have no life~”

“I see.” She might be a little weaker when it comes to out-of-club activities though.

“And I might even play in a game~ Ryuuko-san might just end up playing on the team this year.”

“Yeah? Nice going!” Basketball team often swaps players around, so the possibility might be higher than with, say, a softball or kendo team. “If you end up playing, I might go watch.” I tried saying what’s on my mind.

At the moment, the line Ryuushi-san’s bicycle drew twisted. The front wheel slid precariously on the road with an incomplete 8. Is this a telltale sign that my support isn’t helpful at all?

“Y-y-you might go? Ah, uh, cheering? For me?”

Ryuushi-san adjusted the depth of her helmet and peered up at me. She looked more surprised than troubled... Uh, well, as long as it wasn't disgust. I let it drop. Maybe she thought it would be embarrassing if she ended up not playing?

“Yeah, I might. But maybe not if it's too far away.”

“Wuu... Time out. Ryuuko, you're up~ Trade with Mikki... Wuu, wuu~”

Somehow she seemed worried. Yeah, there goes the almost right-infringing name again, but was she emulating what's going to happen when she plays? I waited for the result silently.^[10]

Students passing by in the scenery entered my conscious after I shut up and looked forward. There were white, sturdy-looking buildings around us; the only movement was the undulation of wet clothes swaying in the yard. Without those, I might never suspect anything of living in there.

Children going home filled the creek that flowed alongside the road. They're fishing for something — probably crayfishes. Where I lived, you can easily find a ton of them if you dig into the mud around the rivers.

“...Hm.” Somehow I reminisced about that place. Not to the point of homesickness though.

It was a peaceful town. Although I have heard that things happened many years ago in the neighboring towns, nothing ever made it there — the town merely stagnated.

Am I like now because of how simple the world was? The pursuit of Youth-points, I mean. If there's such a way to unearth them, shouldn't everyone carry around with them a card of collecting Youth-points in order to revitalize the place?

Not possible, huh. My head spun from the scorching sun, and I lost direction.

The only thing unchanged from the last summer.

The inescapable heat.

Riding outside for so long, I even had the illusion that my clothes were getting

heavier from the sweat.

“Niwa-kun.” Someone called my name; I looked to the left. Awkwardly, Ryuushi-san spoke.

“I-I might have a chance of playing so if you can, please come watch.”

“Okay.”

I will choose to believe in that slightly-stiff-on-the-left expression.

“O~kay, so... Enough about that. So listenen.”

Slap! She clapped to end the topic. Wasn't there an extra 'en' in there?

“So do ya mind if someone were to write lotsa mails to ya?”

Mails... Oh, the phone? We finally have each other's number, after all.

“I would simply be glad.” Even better if it was my wonderful classmate. Not so much for a certain big kid though.

“Then I will do my best to maily-mail you lotsa of things. Ya are also welcome to send me lotsa things!”

Lots of enigmatic words there, but I got what she was saying. Was the chest bumped by her fist unsteady, or ample? The usage of 'or' might be mistaken here, but who cares? Just like Ryuushi-san's way of speech: as long as it carries the message, it's perfect.

“Ok~ I will also do the same... Not that I have many things to talk about, but I will still try.”

“Oh no, doncha underestimate me. Individualistic and full of hobbies, I have lotsa things to talk about! Let's begin the investigation of the Value of Ryuuko-san this summer!”

I couldn't help but grin at her baseless confidence — perhaps it's the same as seeing small animals.

When the time comes to next year, before the college exams, I don't think we'd be able to talk like this anymore. The kind of over-thinking melancholy drifted in and out of my head; even so, I came to the conclusion: just enjoy this year.

After reaching the imposing semi-circle bridge before the crossroad, I bid Ryuushi-san farewell. Just like always, Ryuushi-san stared at the bridge that she must pedal up; with her tongue sticking out, she yelled, ‘uwoh~’ as she heaved up. From since club activities ended a week before the exams, I’ve grown accustomed to watching this.

As we parted, Ryuushi-san bloomed at me a smile so wide her eyes squinted to a line.

“Let’s have fun during the summer, Niwa-kun.”

Just like when we first met, her voice has always chimed ‘spring.’

“Ma~ko~to~chwan~!”

I was unfortunately attacked the moment I got home. Evasive maneuver. “Chwan~Chwan~!” The assault persisted. Backstep. “Yes, yes!” Shield up with the bike. “Babuu~!” Even my head was about to collapse under this combined attack with heat. As for the forty-year old standing in front me, it would appear that her brain was still festering.^[11]

What the hell kind of treatment involves standing outside of your own house after cycling through this weather?

And here we have Meme-san, who, despite her age, is the walking symbol of high spirit. Stomping on the ground animatedly, she stretched her hands uniformly toward me. On her were a sleeveless shirt and short shorts — the kind that’s suitable only in your own house. ‘Could you please consider your age?’ was what came to mind.

“Guwasi!”

“That’s the Makoto you’re talking about?” She actually did it. What an impressive aunt I have.^[12]

Still doing the Guwasi pose, she inched closer to me. I was of course still carrying the bike while backing off. Am I going to back out of my own abode again after finally making it in here?

And how could I let my aunt hug me every time? ‘Can only be hugged by his aunt.’ The void within me grew from such a setting.

“My~ Mako-kun is always so~ cold~! Why are you so cold? Are you trying to chill? But that’s just sad if your life is a like a test of courage... Sobs.”

Are you complaining to or sympathizing with me? I’d like to reject both, but at least punctuate your sentences.

“Listen, Meme-san.”

“What~?” Please stop acting cutesy.

“Sorry to kill your buzz, but since you were too active in the past month, you won’t have any appearances this time.”

“W-what~?”

That reaction was just as bad as learning that the human race is doomed. But take this into consideration:

Last time, she was moving at an intense speed that was like getting five or six 6’s with a dice; this time, therefore, she should balance it out with a turtling pace. Please, please don’t expect more scenes during this summer.

Tossing aside the other young, cute girls in favour of the forty-year old aunt just doesn’t make sense.

And whose genius plan was this? There are, in this world, nonsensical things that either make no difference or are absolutely problematic. I want to write a complaint to a certain existence in this world... Wait, then I will become just like my cousin.

Speaking of this cousin, Touwa Erio: what is she doing today?

Just as I was about to look up to the second floor of the Touwa household, the shotgun speech of Meme-san carpeted me:

“Then my plan of ‘going to the summer festival, leaning into him on the night road coloured in a fantastic orange, eating chocolate banana, cotton candy, candy apple, cupcakes, tako-yaki, miso buns, candied fruit, and finally seduce him’ is hindered — no, ruined~!”

“Keep dreaming that grand delusion of yours.”

And aren’t you just eating the entire time? Am I paying for all that? Just what

kind of expectation does this adult have for a highschooler who doesn't even have a job?

... Summer festival, huh? If possible, I want to go with a 'girl.' The tide of Youth-points await me — I must dive into it.

“.....”

I was just immersed in my reverie. As for who the girl walking next to me was... I'll leave that to your imagination (I can, however, swear to the gods that it was most definitely not Meme-san).

“Hmph! Then the melodramatic story of Meme-san doing everything behind the scene will be on again!”

“Just stay home and relax, geez.”

“Hoo hoo hoo hoo~”

Meme-san made the noise of the cutest ape in the world (this isn't a compliment please think again), apparently ready to run back into the air-conditioned room. I have to be really careful about telling her what to do — she truly is a nosy big kid.

“Oh~ Also get the laundry on your way in~”

Some such instruction replacing 'welcome back' was flung out of the house. Looks like that's why she came outside. But she probably got lazy after playing (more like messing) with me. “Alright~” With a casual reply, I re-grasped the analog sticks of the bicycle (is that a correct term?). Well, I suppose it is true that I am living under her care, so it would be rude to not do it.

“Hm?” The object in my right pocket vibrated. Am I receiving a call? After checking the plasma display on my cellphone, it would appear that it was the classmate whom I only know half the name of.

It was a mail from Maekawa-san, with whom I have just traded number with. She's really fast~ I thought while reading the message.

‘Let's play baseball!’

The title texts already conveyed the message. Blank filled the content page.

“...Why?”

The phone rung right after as though answering my question. It's Maekawa-san. I answered.

“Hello?”

“Did you get that mail?”

Through the speaker, I had a different impression of her voice. Just a little bit, her voice changed.

“I did. Are you checking to see if I got it?”

“I'm seeing if you gave me the correct address. So quick question: do you like baseball?”

“Uh... I played a bit in elementary school. I don't even watch it on the TV now though.”

“Really? Well, we don't really mind beginners either. I was just wondering to see if you're up for some amateur baseball.”

“...Hm.” I rung the bicycle bell. “Are you a recruiter, Maekawa-san?”

“Only in the summer, actually. And you don't have to play every game: I was just trying to see if I can get someone to fill the spot. So... How do you feel about a bit of a mornin' sweat?”

“In the morning, huh.”

“It's also bit more than just baseball though.”

“Hm? What do you mean?”

“I mean it's more than just playing the game. The shopping district's team only has six members, so of course the last three has to be volunteers. Now hiring! High schoolers!”

“I feel like the notice will expose how bad the team is actually doing right now.”

“So, what do you say? I was just wondering since it's a day before the game. You're more than welcome to say no.”

“Hm~ Well... Why not? If I feel like it I'll go. I'm a total noob though, are you sure?”

“I'm positive. Thanks for the help then. Entry fee is that you have to invite another person.”

“Sure feels like recruiting for new club members. But how come you didn't just ask me at school? Did you forget?”

“Come on, transfer student. I'm not gonna ask you that in front of Ryuushi.”

“Okay...?” I don't see the connection between Ryuushi-san and baseball, so the reply was just obligatory.

Ahahaha! With that, Maekawa-san hung up. She's one of those with a strange ecology. I still think her degree of alien-ness is second only to Erio. Ryuushi-san is just a normal human. I like that impression better, even though I know she'd be mad if I were to say that. Her NG word is 'no personality.'

Well, I think being too conspicuous is an issue too. E.G, my cousin.

I took a left at front of the entrance, toward the storage.

In front of the shed was a certain someone cleaning her telescope. Carrying that dusty thing hiding in the corner of her room all the way out into the yard, she diligently wiped at it. Perhaps noticing me behind her, she stuffed the rag into the bucket next to her feet. She spun around, scattering light.

“Yo.” I raised a hand to her. She's off-work today?

“Yo.” She imitated. Still sounds like a stiff vocal practice till this day.

This she was Touwa Erio, the daughter of the forty year old from earlier. Her profession... Freelancer?

Her hair was as though blended with blue dye number one — azure, as if governed by transparency and secrecy. Her eyes too: perhaps sharing the similarly unique irises. In all, she doesn't have the colour of a human. Despite her being a pretty girl emitting particles, I cannot candidly accept that brilliance and quality.

Was it due to the first impression? Or because I've categorized her appearance as wine glass? For your information, she has a terrible reputation in

the town; she is, however, responsible for at least half of that.

Though exposing just as much skin as Meme-san was with her sagging one-piece dress, I found myself accepting the getup naturally. This must be what they call the cruelty of age: the inevitability.

These two sure are similar when it comes to never tanning — their skin is white like table salt.

“Not wearing the futon today?” I half-jokingly jabbed at her.

“Mm.” She pointed. Oh, I see her favourite futon getting a sunbath.

Erio then gazed up at me with her water-like eyes. She seemed like she wanted to say something, unwilling to look away; her hands traced the water in the bucket, as if frolicking.

“What about work?”

Currently, Erio is employed in the Tamura Shop. As of recent, her daily pay has been increased from five hundred to five hundred fifty yen — she personally came and explained to me rather excitedly.

“After this.”

Unchanged was her broken way of speaking. As clear as the words were, it was difficult to connect them into a sentence. Like about to shoot out a beam, Erio fixed her eyes on me still.

“Um... Do you, want to tell me something?” I had to ask her.

“Mm.” Now I'm sure. Erio's one hand pinched the rag and scooped it up; she watched intently as the absorbed water fell down. With her free hand, she pointed at the telescope's body.

“Telescope.”

“Okay.”

“Sky.” She raised her arm toward the sky.

“Oh, I think I get the gist of it.”

“Note.” She picked up the notebook with her wet hand.

Erio gently slapped the notebook with 'use for record' written rigidly on it. A satisfied nod.

“Summer, stargazing.”

“Oh.” I knew it. Well, she did prepare the telescope and all, so I already thought so. The concept of vacation is far gone for you. As that was very insensitive, I didn't say anything.

The moment before she said anything else, something changed on Erio's so-far expressionless face.

I might not be able to grasp every detail of her emotion, but, for analogy's sake, it's like a child who can't be honest about wanting to play with someone else: she'd run next to her target and starts playing with her toys, so the other person would give the initiative — it is the feeling of almost palpable expectation.

“The cousin, too?”

Erio's hand squished tightly at the rag. Like observing the situation, she tossed player two's controller to me.

“So what you're saying is you want me to hang out with you?”

Apparently she'd been anticipating, Erio nodded twice intensely. I don't mind the beach, but what about the reason for this? I've never once expressed interest in astronomy.

The reason, huh... Maybe she's grown attached to me? The premise being Erio having no other friends.

“Fine, sure. If I have time then we'll hang out.”

“...Ah.”

For just a second, I fell in the particles that dance and traced about Erio like comet tails. The tail wagged left and right, like that of a dog's. In the end, they dissipated into the air.

“Welcome.”

“Why are you handing out a rag to welcome someone?”

Or is it like shaking hands? Is it? I can only touch the rag?

I rejected her tribute. Even Erio unveiled her occasional defenseless smile; she turned back to cleaning the telescope. Compare to before, it was about fifty percent faster... What's up with that?

Basketball game, amateur baseball and stargazing. Even if I were to disregard the part about the summer festival...

Oh man~ Mako-kun is super popular~ ...Am I allowed to say that? Something felt off, though. Might be because I'm still not used to having a life that involves people other than me. Anxiety was stronger than the cordiality.

“...Well, whatever.”

I mumbled the conclusion to myself. Acceptance came slow, like flow in the water, gradually melting and diffusing.

Something will come along eventually; I will solve things as I see fit.

Before heading into the shed.

Hands on the bicycle handles, I looked up toward the sky.

The only conscious torso split from within — a suffocating sensation overwhelmed me.

No rain clouds — the cobalt scenery painted with water colour caught my eyes.

Blocked by the rooftop, the sun that appeared like the halfmoon stiffened my face.

I've been here for four months already. Seasons changed from spring to the summer.

Even in the town of aliens, the season's order is unchanged. What kind of Youth-point could I possibly find in the first summer out of my hometown?

“In any case...”

This summer will be spent with baseball and stargazing!

... Wait, seriously?

現在の青春ポイント合計

+2 (前回からの持ち越し)



Chapter 1 - Local-only Alien Incidents

Was it a ball or a strike? I had no idea, so I just swung.

In order to make maximum contact to the low-flying straight, I adjusted the degree.

It didn't miss, but neither did it make a resounding hit to the centre — a roll to the third base. The third baseman, a businessman-looking guy with glasses, gingerly picked up the ball and tossed it to first base.

The unusually enthusiastic me was easily taken out. Sadly, my second batting ended there. I took off the helmet and jostled back to the resting area.

Well, whatever. The certain someone who was recruited to work as a bakery's assistant might just be more beneficial to the team than I am. [\[13\]](#)

...Like so, the second day of summer began. I immediately joined the amateur baseball team; after getting that invitation from Maekawa-san yesterday, I thought I should always try new things out. Because of that, I headed toward the river bank early this morning.

Within the first two days of break, I secretly went to a batting cage and practised catch-and-throw with a wall. Don't tell anybody.

Since the sun was only peeking out, the time was perfect for doing outdoor things. I even saw sleepy grade schoolers on their way to do their radio callisthenic. Now that it's been mentioned, it reminded me of waking up early during the summer when the activity was still half-mandatory — some such nostalgia swelled. [\[14\]](#)

The bank had not have its pebbles and weed removed, so running was easy. If a ball were to ever fall into the river, it'd be considered a home run; since there was quite a distance from the outfield to the water, I don't think any one of us amateurs could ever hit it that far. The ball might just end up in there if it could

somehow miraculously fly along the foul line without any interruption.

Despite the sun being at a low angle, my scalps still perspired as the exercise proceeded. What reminded my skin during this time was not the searing heat of desert, but of the past rain season.

Returning from home base to the resting area, I heard the older people saying ‘good job,’ and stopped in the front of my acquaintance.

“What a shame, transfer student.”

Out of concern, I relented... Still, I took a seat next to Maekawa-san. She wasn’t personally participating in the game: she claimed that ‘she was the girl manager.’ If that’s the case, could you please have on the proper attire? I prayed.

“Are you making fun of me?”

“Nah, I think it’s pretty impressive even if you only chipped the ball.”

She shuffled the... left and right. I don’t want to expose what the ‘things’ are yet. If possible, I’d like to keep ignoring the fact and never mention it again; hence I kept Maekawa-san out of my sight and stared obliviously at the field.

Our opponent was the city side’s team. Since we, the shopping district, don’t get along well with them, both sides were fairly zealous... Well, not really: we were all just having fun. Though we were losing by two points, there hadn’t been complaints yet. In fact, you could even hear laughter. Excluding me and Maekawa-san, this is an old-men team with the youngest member being twenty five. I guess they don’t really care about winning or losing..

No uniforms either — everyone wore casuals.

“It’s only the third day anyway; nothing is set in stone. What matters, though, is in three weeks.” Even with her smile, I still failed to understand what Maekawa-san was saying.

In any case, the pitcher over there was a girl. She’s probably in high school like I am, but her pitch was rather strange: first, she twists her arm toward the left; then she curves it rightward to make an 8 shape. Finally, she released with an underhand. It looks like a softball pitch, but since I’ve only heard of the arm-

spin style, I don't know for sure. It's just that it's hard to time the swing, and I'm often too late.

From being struck out during my first batting, I tried swinging earlier. The result was a roll. At least, when compared to the 100kmph ball at the batting cage, her pitches are trickier.

By the way, about her wearing the uniform — it must have been tricky for the older guys too in a different way. Like the skirt fluttering. What stood out the most to me, though, was her rubbing her eyes listlessly, as if she was forced to show up. No, I'm not kidding. Still, what a masterpiece it is to see a girl in summer uniform bustling in a baseball field~ Credits will still be given where it's due.

"She's from our school, isn't she?" Judging from the uniform.

"Yep. The captain of our softball club... I don't remember her name. We've only met once last year when I joined for a while. I think she's called Hana... zawa?"

Even though she was staring daggers at the person on that hill, her tone sounded equivocal.

"...Was that who your outfit reminded you of?"

"Yep."

"....." The stance of ignorance has reached its limit. So, we shall talk about 'it.'

Maekawa-san was wearing a fish costume today.

Since her face was poking out of the giant mouth, she looked like she was about to be devoured from the side.

At first, when I got here and saw her, I almost asked the fish store's owner 'what do ya think about this?' But neither the shopping district people nor those of the city side paid any particular attention to Maekawa-san — they're probably used to it. Maybe they see her as the mascot of a professional team?

Another pair of eyes followed us for a different reason... Maekawa-san didn't care, so I followed suit.

"What do you call this outfit?"

“Katsuo.”

“.....” I intentionally said nothing. It’s not like I’m Nakajima.^[15]

The fins seem to be where the arms are. Even though she flapped her arms about, I pretended to not see.

I know Maekawa-san is a little loose upstairs, but from our exams last semester I know she’s better than Ryuushi-san and I when it comes to academics. She’s also created a new historical record in the P.E exams — the kind you shouldn’t be proud of.

“This is the ‘one-handed-fishing’ type.”

“I don’t see what’s so different.” I can’t even fathom what the other kinds look like.

“What do you think of the match so far?”

“Weird. I feel like the girl in yukata from last time seemed to be more enthusiastic about this than I am.” I sensed extreme enjoyment of baseball from that girl.

“Girl, huh...?”

The face hiding inside the mouth grinned mischievously. The surreality of this whole thing pinnacled with the bonito’s inorganic eyes that focused nowhere.

The white ball flying out from the hand of Hanazawa-san (subject to change) shot toward the third batter (I was second)... Yamamoto-san? The rocket guy we met at the beach during June (he was the other helper brought by the man who owns the Yakitori shop). It went by the bat and landed in the catcher’s gloves gracefully. Top of fourth inning, 3 strikeouts on the third bat. In other words, no one made it to first base.

“Change~ Keep it up with the defence too.”

The fins encouraged me on the way out. If she could wearing something like a team uniform and sit at the resting area with arms crossed, instead of that out-of-place seafood outfit (that doesn’t mean I want her to wear river fish outfit though) she might have the air of a beautiful lady coach instead.

I thought it was wasteful, but also ‘well, it’s more Maekawa-esque this way,

right?’ Thus begin the stage of acceptance. I struggled to put together a conclusion under the chaotic thoughts; grabbing the gloves lent to me, I stood from the bench.

“I suck at defence; don’t count on it.”

“Ahahah, you’re so pessimistic, transfer student. I bet you’re like an esper who refuses to go to a TV show but likes to point and yell at a TV screen.”

Getting to point Z from A. I had hoped that she would at least call me ‘humble,’ or that I have a clear understanding of how good I am: I’m just aware that I can’t fully rely on my hidden potential, and that’s worked out so far. That’s why when I first met Erio I... Well, it really doesn’t matter now.

As for the TV thing, it’s mostly correct, though I do try not to talk to myself. I was, therefore, shocked — Maekawa-san’s keen eye is not to be underestimated. Still, she should probably start reflecting about herself.

I jogged toward the infield and stood at first base. I actually wanted to be at this position the least — the chance of encountering the ball is, after all, the highest. For someone who rarely play catch ball, just when would I miss a throw, or simply fall backward? The anxiety was killing me.

Luckily, I can still perform the act of catching a ball. So far, no obvious mishaps.

Show me what you got! I knocked on the glove, waiting for it to end peacefully. By it, I don’t mean just one thing.

Continuing the last inning, the person standing on the hill would appear to be Maekawa-san’s ‘pops.’ According to prior observation, no one else could have been staring holes into me, who sat next to his daughter at the resting area. Just before the game, Maekawa-san introduced me to the team: “This is my friend. His name is, uh, Shiwa-kun.” I thought I said Niwa~! Ignore the horribly mistaken name that would seemingly make me thirty years older — a dad witnessing his daughter bringing a guy along: imagine how shocked he was. It’s no wonder he didn’t think I was ‘just a friend.’

His jaw looked like it would fall onto the ground. I didn’t know how to react, so I kept a dumbfound look on. That’s probably why the misunderstanding was

so severe. My attitude was kinda like ‘the boyfriend who was suddenly introduced to his girlfriend’s dad,’ huh. Now that I’m thinking about it, I’m agonizing over my failure.

In the dad’s brain, the misunderstanding is going to transform like a three-stage monster: ‘friend -> boyfriend -> wuss.’ The possibility was not entirely deniable.

And perhaps because of that whole thing, Maekawa-san’s dad had terrible control of his pitches. Maybe the batters were scared of almost being shot? It’s kind of funny how the score difference didn’t get any bigger — not so much when someone is glaring at me from the side.

Maekawa-san didn’t seem to mind, though, kicking her flippers against the ground. After making eye contact with me, her already-sharp eyes squinted even more. Though difficult to tell from under the shade, she seemed to be smiling. I smiled back and lightly waved my left hand.

Stepping onto the first base from four balls, the boy who never swung his bat took off his helmet. He turned and glanced at me, unveiling a cordial smile.

It looks like the only high schoolers on that team were also just Hanazawa-san and this guy. He had a head of blonde hair, giving off the air of a cool bro-type person: in all, he seem like an amicable guy.

And I suppose that’s why? Even when he spoke to me, who belonged on the other team, it seemed neither hostile nor startling.

“Did you know?” The guy I’ve never met before easily produced a sentence ending with a question mark.

“Know what?” I kept my eyes toward the batter while asking him to reveal the mystery.

“About our pitcher.”

“Hm.” Hanazawa-san, right?

“If you stand on the left side of the batter’s box, you can see beneath her skirt.”

“...For real?” I had to turn around and ask.

“Course not.”

He displayed a free-flowing attitude and exposed the punchline.

...Oho, is this a ritual?

It's a way to ascertain whether the other person is a friend, or someone who can't be spoken freely with: students came up with it to see if they can get along. Simply put, it's a signal for me to make my move.

I put on a smile after receiving it. Youth can also be obtained from a guy friend.

“I'm Nakajima. You?”

There it is, Nakajima. He may be on the other team, but the sense of miraculous meeting with the perfect side characters diffused in my chest. Needless to say, he had no clue about my excitement behind the silence. Nakajima, who observed me without any lenses, suspiciously titled his head; frantically, I told him my name.

“Niwa Makoto.” I thought about calling myself Isono, but since there's already a Katsuo, I'm going to stop myself.^[16]

“I knew it — you're that transfer student.”

“Does that mean we go to the same school?”

“Yeah. Different class though.”

Nakajima reached his kind-looking right hand toward me; despite it being the middle of a match, I shook hand with him. If I remember correctly, the rules in baseball are that you're not supposed to be too friendly with your opponents. Well no, maybe just in some manga... Or maybe not? I thought while the two sweaty hands made contact. Nakajima had short fingers, but his palm was bigger than mine.

But wait, it's already been a semester since I transferred here. Yet the name 'transfer student' is still circulating. The expiration date of my well-known status is truly astonishing.

It's not like the fact that I transferred here is enough to shock the school that much. Well, middle school aside, I guess it is rarer to transfer after high school.

Besides, I do secretly hold the fuse to scandals.

Touwa Erio. If our relationship were to be divulged, yet another fire may rise among the class. The same metaphor applies even for how news spread in a school: in just the blink of an eye, you will no longer have an escape.

...Nothing much can be done to that, though. Either way, I already know my answer. Still, I'm apprehensive to the thought.

"What dragged ya here, transfer student?"

With a bit of a dialect, Nakakjima asked the reason of my presence. After making sure Maekawa Dad's stiff pitch ended up as a strike, I spoke.

"Nothing. Maekawa-san told me to."

"Oh~ You're pretty close, huh,"

He gracefully painted his face full of obscene curiosity, arbitrarily postulating me and Maekawa-san's friendship. I hope he'd stop: if it were to make it into Maekawa dad's ears, he might just take the anger out on me.

"But I thought you were...?"

"Hm?"

"Oh, uh... Well, I just thought you are into weird girls."

"I do not hold romantic feelings for sea creatures."

Though I love deep sea fishes, it's like viewing an artistic masterpiece... That's still a bit too much though, since we're talking animals. Similar to defining emotion, it is a situation that no amount of contemplation would yield an answer.

Like attempting to check your own back, only anxiety would culminate.

"Ohoh, is your magnanimity why you're so popular, master?"

"That's totally not what I said, but what about you? I really want to learn how to have a good-looking face like yours."

Nakajima laughed, seemingly awkwardly, after my retort. Did I step on a landmine? Maybe he thinks his face isn't good-looking at all... If he does then the other guys would probably stone him.

“You live around the shopping districts, right? Since you’re on that side...”

Nakajima moved the conversation along calmly. “I wonder~” While watching Maekawa Dad’s third pitch become a passed ball and the catcher frantically going after it, I gave an equivocal response.

“If we’re talking about where I live, then I’d say the city. However.”

“However?”

The Touwa would probably be on the same side as Tamura Obaa-san. But am I part of the Touwa family?

“My~ Silly Mako-kun! So polite and so shy! You have to make your heart the same as your eyes that screams ‘My’ instead of ‘Miss’ and become Touwa Makoto! Marriage YES!”

Some voice I’m hearing. It’s supposed to be just imagination, but the sound is really driving me nuts.

So there’s the whole shopping district vs city thing, huh?

Might as well ask the guy who seems mostly neutral.

“Is regional rivalry actually a thing here in this town?”

“A lot of people live here: there are those who do, but many don’t care either way.”

I’m probably the latter, Nakajima shrugged as he added. “There are kids at school who were bullied for that stuff though.” His tone was as though discussing other countries’ problems: lacking emotions, like a comment with no sense of reality. I, too, glossed over with a ‘oh.’

But I also think that if we can create a society free of discrimination, humans can at least survive for another 30,000 years. Or maybe because ‘bullying’ exists as an outlet, things around get done?

“But it’s the worst during the time between big events. Especially now.”

“Hm?”

“Because it’s a mess every year during the summer festival.”

That’s why we play ball, Nakajima mumbled enigmatically. I didn’t understand

what he meant, so I'll leave it for now. Summer festival — the dream of youth. The candidates for my partner... Three people? Erio included. If I were to say that the momentary thought didn't contain any lies, I'd be helpless. Well actually, it wouldn't be a problem, right? As usual, I will ignore the omen-like whisper. No, I can't. For some mysterious reason, I just cannot accept the notion.

There are certain secrets and hidden thoughts.

I respect the heart that refuses to admit these things — even if it means the loss of youth points.

Pointlessly, I fought against something.

Spending time calculating the probability of Maekawa-san sincerely dressing up with a Yukata might just be... just as pointless.

“Oh, um.”

Still stuck at first base, Nakajima spoke slightly hesitantly.

“Hm?”

“I'm a little too polite, aren't I?”

“Too polite... Hm, just a bit.” He certainly sounded distant.

“To be honest, I thought that if I started something too serious, I'd ruin whatever flow we got going.”

'But I still wanted to try.' Like a dishonest girl, Nakajima explained to me his motivation and the reason for his tone. Please don't do this to me.

I had thought that the reason of such awkwardness is because we just met, but there seemed to be another reason.

“Don't you have something you wanna say to me?” He might be interested in Maekawa-san.

“Don't sweat it: the fun of choices is also in pretending the meeting by chance didn't happen.”

As if peering at something bright, Nakajima squinted while glancing around.

“Our pitcher is really damn good, huh.”

Again with the mental gymnastic. Completely irrelevant. Do I not have the right to cast the die?

“I can never hit her pitches.”

As I declared my defeat, Nakajima shot me a stray smile and gunned toward the second base. What just happened?! My eyes followed him blindly. Well, it's just a steal. A failed steal.

The catcher, guy who runs the flower shop, seemed prideful of his right shoulder. It must be rare for an amateur to stop a steal. He's even hugging it out with Maekawa dad. It's like the game's over or something.

So this was an amateur game that allows for base stealing? Well, the kids' rule of 'five out-of-bounds equals strike' should be a tell-tale sign of how liberal the rules are.

Nakajima beamed an embarrassed smile, mostly toward me, while moving closer to the resting area. I didn't know how to react to that, so I simply smiled.

“...Sigh.” I exhaled, looking toward the ascending summer sun.

Like so, I played a game of baseball.

A random group competition nowhere close to sweat, tear and Koushi-en.^[17]

Will I list this as part of the daily life of summer? I've yet to decide.

In accordance the rules of the game, the competition ended at the sixth innings. The result: 3 — 0. A complete defeat on our part.

Or we can call it an utter wreckage, since not one of us made it onto a base, making it a perfect game.

Hanazawa-san had on her face still an impatient look, apathetic to the result.

As for me, setting my batting record aside, I've gotten compliments from the old guys... My smile? Half and half of courtesy and sourness, maybe even a little awkward.

A couple of lame bow, and then we were done for the day... That would have been the idea, but the losers apparently have to clean the field out of tradition, so we're far from finished. According to the guys, 'we're gettin' better at

cleanin' than baseballin'!" So they've been on a losing streak?

"See ya." After packing up, Nakajima came to say bye before leaving the bank. "Bye." Seeing my brief response, he scurried over to a bicycle. Was he being held up? Now that I think about it, I still don't get why he came by.

Following that, while I was cleaning the field with those one of those long-shafted tools, the rocket guy came to talk to me. It's Yamamoto-san. That's what Meme-san calls him, but is it really his name?

"Hey, you are... The boy living in Touwa Meme's house?"

"I am." Space stalker + Maekawa-san's fan, as well as Meme-san's friend — quite a colourful resume. I think I would prefer to not know the full content of it though.

"How's Meme doing?"

"If you can call a forty year old women who acts like a five or six year old 'energetic,' then she is doing very well."

She even eats the same thing as Erio and I, so just how efficient is her mileage? I could only think that she must have taken the energy drained from others and threw it into the burner.

"Did she, mention anything about me?"

With an anticipating and fidgety demeanour, he asked. Hey hey hey, is this dude...?

"Nope, nothing."

Since whenever she won't shut up, I just ignore half of what she says; she might have mentioned Yamamoto-san somewhere along the line, but I have decided to not give hope with any false information. "I see." Yamamoto-san clearly looked disappointed, shoulders slouching. Now I'm sure.

I didn't think he is so loyal to Meme-san... Their age is close, and I will admit Meme-san looks really young for a forty year old... Well, whatever. I'm not so dense as to ruin someone else's love life. My aunt sure is popular.

But I just couldn't imagine the sight of some guy next to Meme-san, sitting around the table in the Touwa Household.

Yamamoto-san shambled away like the summer heat, beginning the act of picking up rocks. What happened next was the sneaky... I didn't hear it or anything, but I felt it. By then I was already used to it. But I pretended to have not notice: please ask your own daughter about our relationship.

Clean up complete. With my arm, I swiped away more sweat than from during the game while leaving the field. Because Maekawa-san was still sitting in the resting area, I decided to go over with the intent of saying bye before heading home.

“Well done, transfer students.”

Maekawa-san gave me her consolation, at the same time handing three triangular objects wrapped in plastic wrap on her fin.

“What is this?”

“Rice balls.”

“No, I don't mean that.”

“I made these for your breakfast~”

“Oh~” I was quietly moved by the reward for joining this amateur baseball game.

I can't believe I got handmade breakfast from a classmate — truly, it was serendipity.

Visually speaking, it was like getting a pearl from a dolphin I saved. Despite knowing that Maekawa Dad will only glare harder, I still gratefully accepted them and peeled the wrap off, all the while taking a seat next to Maekawa-san.

[18]

Enjoying the classmate's — no, self-proclaimed manager's handmade rice balls after a baseball game: it's nothing innovative, but certainly a steady development of youth. I guess it's about +2 points.

Meanwhile I kept an eye on her father's watchful stares — perhaps things will actually go to a better direction. The joy of hiding behind grown-ups and enjoying the mischief flared.

In the first rice ball was a slightly-sweet sauce.

“Ah, it's eel.”

“Just some stuff left in the shop.”

“Haven't had it in a while.” Tastes good. “And there is this, uh, what do you call it, the eel dish here.”

“Hitsu-mabushi.”

“Yeah, that stuff.”

“I think it's actually something you can buy everywhere now.”

“Here.” Maekawa-san watched me eat, and handed a thermos to me. If the fin could be removed, everything would be perfect. “Thanks.” I took the bottle and poured the cold drink into my cup, before emptying it in one gulp. Ahh, a cup of tea after cleaning up tastes so good. So what was I planning on doing again?

“So why did you make rice balls for me?”

“It's thanks for your work. **Rice** (nice) job.”

“Work? You're kidding, right? All I did was roll the ball.”

“Nah, you made the ball roll forward.”

“Well yeah. If it went backward it would have been a foul.”

“That's not what I'm saying, transfer student. You're just too shy.”

Maekawa-san gently shut her eyes with the embracing smile of a guardian. If it weren't for the bonito's dead-eye, it would have been a praise-worthy sight.



'Maekawa-san gently shut her eyes with the embracing smile of a guardian. If it weren't for the bonito's dead-eye, it would have been a praise-worthy sight.'

You could say it's befitting of Maekawa-san though.

The content in my pocket shook, emitting a muffled synthetic sound. "Oh, a mail."

"My guess is Ryuushi."

"Not telling." She's probably correct though.

I shoved the last bit of the rice ball into my mouth before taking the phone out of my pocket. Today would probably be a day full of mails — I brought my phone under the assumption. I didn't take it out during defence either: what would I do if I had to pounce to the sides? Despite it being my own issue, I thought of it from an outsider's view.

In the span of two days there were about thirty or so messages saved in the mailbox. Like fruits during a harvest, their chance of appearance exploded. I maximized the mail's content.

'Mornin'~ Are ya up yet, Niwa-kun? Soz if not. I just woke up~'

A trivial but cute message; a normal message that is the polar opposite of Meme-san's overly abstract 'shuu~ bang~' message.

I checked the time as well: it's just passed eight o' clock. From the previous emails, it can be deduced that Ryuushi-san usually wakes up around this time during breaks.

Ryuushi-san never uses emoticons in her mails. The reason being 'if everyone's using it, it's not hip any more~ Being a chara-hunta, that's a big no-no.'^[19]

Or maybe because others girls have stopped using it too? I don't have the galls to ask something like that. With a bit of effort, I replied firmly, 'I'm up already. Good morning.'

"What a boring reply."

"Uwah!" The fish on the side disapproved its entertainment value.

“Don’t you plan on writing something that would make Ryuushi laugh?”

“If I do, she would try to one-up me and crash and burn.”

Not even kidding — she lost about four hours of sleep a couple of days ago.

Upon hearing that, Maekawa-san raised the corner of her mouth amusedly.

“Fine. I guess it is a little too demanding to expect her to write well.”

She nonchalantly said something rude. I reached for the second rice ball and asked.

“Have you and Ryuushi-san texted each other at all?”

“Nope, none whatsoever. Ryuushi never sent me a thing.”

“Oh... Hm?”

I sensed a gaze different from Maekawa dad’s. Looking up, it was from Hanazawa-san, who had yet to return home, staring from a distance away. Actually, following her line of sight it was probably the rice ball on my hand. “Give me rice ball.” If her eyes could speak, the message would probably be summarized with these four words. Perhaps because of our eye contact, Hanazawa-san stepped toward this direction.

If this were a fairy tale, I’d probably have some good luck if I share a rice ball with her.

I looked over at Maekawa-san; she seemed to have noticed and gave a fast reply:

“It’s already yours, transfer student. It up to you to keep it or give it.”

“Hm~” She pushed the liability back to me. But to give Maekawa-san’s rice ball to someone else...

Meme-san’s breakfast awaits me when I return. If I refuse to sit down at the table, she’ll probably throw a tantrum. Or maybe she’d call my mother, saying stuff like ‘Mako-kun is so rebellious! He’s been holding back too hard on being an Oba-con and now he’s fallen to sniffing... Kyaah~!’ The hallucination is as strong as ever, I see.^[20]

I will probably be seen as a sniffer for the rest of my life in the Touwa family.

A patch of darkness rose from my heart. Well, rest of my life meaning till I graduate high school, and after that... my parents will be back. Will I miss this place once I have to move back with my parents? Currently I am... unwilling, but not opposing.

I suppose that's just how I am with things.

Enough about this.

Since I still have breakfast waiting for me later, two rice balls is probably enough. Even if I am in the time when I can eat a lot, I'm not some beefcake in a sports club; even that much was a little too much for me anyway.

I raised the third rice ball and beckoned. Hanazawa-san cautiously took the long road, coming from not the front but the side. Only she would know if the act was purposeful.

Looking closely, rather than Hanazawa-san, she's more like 'MAKO*O'. I'm not saying she looks like me, but that her short, auburn hair, and her uniform made her look like she could leap through time. Her tanned skin was also incomparable with Maekawa-san's or mine.^[21]

"Can I?"

Her crisp, water-like whisper confirmed my conscience. Chewing the rice in my mouth, I nodded. I am a little curious about what's in the rice ball though.

Despite being temporarily named that, she didn't seem to have a tough personality.

"Please, Hanazawa-san." I accidentally called her so without knowing her name.

"Thank you, Isono-san."

The immediate reply indicated adaptability, what with the bonito on my side. So what does this make me? The guy with the long face... can't remember his name, but the classmate that shows up every now and then.^[22]

"You should say that to my neighbour."

I'm just the middle man. Hanazawa-san peeled the wrap away and bowed at

Maekawa-san.

“Thanks, Maekawa.”

“Don’t mention it. So why are you wearing your uniform?”

“Yeah, I have club practice later.”

“Sounds rough.”

Maekawa-san earnestly sympathized; Hanazawa-san’s listless expression lowered even more.

“You can tell, huh?”

“Easily.” Maekawa-san nodded sharply. Looking at her, Hanazawa-san grinned weakly while shifting attention to me. As though explaining, she spoke.

“I don’t hate the club; it’s just too much work.”

“Oh...” With minimal reaction, I bit into the rice ball. It’s pickled eggplant this time.

Being a contrast to the sweet-and-spicy sauce from before, the taste of salt was even more accentuated.

Hanazawa-san also bit into her rice ball, chewing lightly while looking over me. Her sleeves occasionally flipped upward; the tan line could be easily seen. Am I a little weird feeling excited by this disparity of coffee and white?

“How’s the taste?”

Maekawa-san asked for Hanazawa-san’s thought. “I might just marry into your family.”

“Mm~ that’s going to be a little hard without my dad divorcing.”

Sounded like she contemplated on that seriously.

Hanazawa stopped before the third bite; for a different reason, she opened her mouth.

“You are... Maekawa’s boyfriend?”

Cough, cough!

“Ahahahah! Hear that, transfer student?”

Am I supposed to show comprehension? I almost suffocated on the plum covered in rice. Is it really not abnormal for me to be with a fish? ...That's not the problem.

While choking on the rice, I made sure to look around. If Maekawa dad were around, I wouldn't be too surprised if he loses his cool... Oh, he's all the way out there. Good.

"I guess the days when the transfer student dresses up like a mackerel isn't too far off."

And here the daughter was, laughing at her own jokes insouciantly.

"That's another level of bad compared to idiot couples and their matching outfits."

"Isn't that right. Also, the transfer student is like, um... The guy..." she rolled her eyes about. "Oh yeah! The guy who tried to drown himself."

With fingers pointed to, I was now the suicide volunteer. "Hah?" I cocked my head quizzically, only to realize at the word 'drown.'

Was she talking about that E.* thing that happened late April?

The day when I rode a rusty bicycle into the sea with Erio. So that's the story that's being passed around the school? Nakajima's attitude makes sense now, since the name transfer student had been branded with that rumour before that status was gone.

Speaking of which, Ryuushi-san also tried to explain to me something about suicide when she visited. Well, shoot. While I was busy messing around with Ryuushi-san after school, being tricked by Maekawa-san, playing tonosan with Erio (stripping the futon off her) all while dealing with Meme-san, the rumour that I was a suicidal bastard spread in the school. I guess I slacked a little too much.

It's fortunate that the fact that I 'jumped with Erio' was unmentioned, but without that I really seem straight-up done with life.

"Oh, I gotta go." Hanazawa-san grumbled melancholily while eyeing the bike moving on the bank. "Thanks~" Jogging toward the road, she raised the rice ball

in appreciation of me and Maekawa-san.

“Mhm.” Staring at her back, Maekawa-san nodded satisfactorily for some reason.

“If you don’t figure out how to deal with Hanazawa’s pitch, victory will ne’er come.”

“Um, isn’t that mission impossible?”

“The future of this team rests upon you, transfer student.”

“Um, no... Not possible. What’s an amateur like me gonna do?”

And we all are. With no regard to me, Maekawa-san smiled joyfully.

“Even if you suck, just fake it till you make it, am I right?”

I almost choked again listening to the statement that almost sounded like an indirect criticism; I took the tea Maekawa-san passed over and washed the rice down. After two more coughs, I replied.

“I just can’t do it.”

“I see. Makes sense.”

Maekawa-san’s jaw shrunk with the bonito’s costume.

“Seems like you’re the type of person who will refuse to start anything.”

She commented on my character, as though able to discern the essence of it. Bullseye — I could only reply with painful silence. As if she saw through me, Maekawa-san continued.

It's neither good nor bad about my personality.

“Will you still join us next time?”

Or rather, it had nothing to do with whatever she said earlier.

“Next time, the transfer student and his shocking development! — You can’t say for sure that that won’t happen next time, right?” The hell did she say?

Sure thing~ I could only mumble, unable to showed definite interest in joining.

Why did I join an amateur baseball team? I’m not some top player — just

some guy who came to fill the spot.

Maekawa-san's invitation was an extrinsic reason that had nothing to do with me.

Hm.

I have to use a different reason. And it's true: a girl's request is hard to refuse.

In the end.

"...Only if I can eat you handmade rice balls next time."

I couldn't say no to my materialistic desire.

As I closed to home, the cicadas were already screaming deafening noise along the road.

After pushing the bicycle into the Touwa's, I saw Erio at the corner of the yard doing the radio callisthenic.

"Chang~ Chang~ Kachang~ Chawang~ Changi~ Chakachang~ Chang..."

Even though there wasn't a radio. As expected of the delusional girl, who can easily replace a radio...? The melody that she sung to herself while happily exercising... Hmmm.

The movement and singing that brought out her tender qualities almost made me think her cute.

She wore a white one-piece today with no futon. The self-deception didn't work today: the sun drove her away from that heat.

"Chang~ Chang chang~ Chang chang~ chang chang~"

Chang chang chang~ Even I hummed along. And she caught me. Erio flung her hair; traces of the particles shot out as she turned. Every time when they fade or reappear, the world around her will shimmer along.

"Yo."

"Morning, cousin."

Neither shied nor shaken. I would have been crushed by the embarrassment if we were flipped — I would have been able to sympathize with Erio's hiding in

futon.

Erio moved closer, stepping on the rampant weed on her bare feet. Ah~ she ran out again without her shoes. She's already been a student, so why does she still refuse to wear shoes?

"Where have you been?"

"The river. We went to play baseball."

"Baseball."

A naive repetition. She increased the frequency of blinks, staring at me with flickering eyes. She's not thinking 'the cousin doesn't go with baseball~' right?

I gazed at her mysterious eyeballs; occasionally I think that maybe she could see things that I can't, which is why the whole alien thing happened... Well, now's not the time for those kind of dreams. "Well then." Please go on with your exercise. I reminded her while pushing the bicycle.

The wheels cranked, the mud and grass it rolled over sung gently. Then the sound of footsteps came; I looked back, and an azure burned into my retina.

I thought the hair was water or waves, with fishes swimming within.

For some reason she pulled on my neck and called 'cousin.' You could have at least pulled on my sleeve or something! "What?"

"Tonight too."

"Yeah, yeah, I know."

I immediately realized her intention and replied quickly. Erio's request for this summer, particular during the night, is to star gaze. Since she came to me, it must mean that the weather will be clear the entire day. At the moment, Erio is the person most concerned about news right now. Unlike when we first met, she no longer tries to receive intelligence from white noises of the screen.

"Are you done?"

"Mm." She flexed her biceps to visually assent that she's done... What a twig-looking arm.

Like a child who couldn't wait to see her favourite weekly show, Erio happily

looked up to me with a big smile. Every time when I answer yes to helping her out with that summer-project-wannabe, she will unconditionally beam at me that heart-skipping particle grin. And every time, I would refuse to look straight at her.

Looking at her directly made me feel like a part of my head would spin uncontrollably.

My phone shook from the signal that hail from a distance. Is it Ryuushi-san's mail? ...It indeed was.

“What the heck! The breakfast was ham and egg! I am under a starving attack!”

There's a picture attached too: a white patternless plate with cherry tomatoes, scrambled eggs, ham laid out like the three kingdoms on the edge of the plate. From the blurry image, I could tell it's an alluring colour.

But for a self-proclaimed fruitarian, this must have been a difficult set up.

If — and I mean if — I get the chance to eat with Ryuushi-san during the break, I must pick the restaurant carefully. But I remember her saying something about noodles being okay.

As for my reply... “It's almost Obon, so the Wasteful Spirits will show up. Just try your best!” The text does feel a bit ad lib, but almost detached; yet, I sent it just the way it was.^[23]

“The cousin, likes baseball?”

I put the bicycle back into the storage; after coming out, I was flung an unexpected question by Erio who seemed to be blocking the entrance. Oh man. With the slight surprise of a parent enjoying his child's strange behaviour, I looked to Erio's eyes. She seemed upset, twiddling her hair while faced down.

I remember asking her the same question unwittingly before.

“Are you interested?”

Erio shook her head wildly; she then took a step back away from me.

“...Oh.”

I vaguely prodded. “Awuu, awuu!” She swung her head of long hair even faster, her face turning even redder.

She was just like someone who was embarrassed to be caught fallen asleep and somehow refuses to admit it.

So dishonest, the two of us. Is it because we're cousins?

In the end she ran away. Erio hid next to the wall and began the second part of the callisthenics, during which I kept looking. After seeing her glances, I went back into the Touwa household.

On the hallway extending from the entrance, Meme-san laid on the floor as though enjoying the coldness on the floor. Her pose was like an insincerely begging for forgiveness, with her butt up and face down. Hair spread everywhere on the floor, I thought it's 'now coming out from the television screen.'^[24]

If that guy saw the this scene, would his fanatically burning love freeze?

“Zzz~ Zzz~ ...Yay~ Meme-chin's won the young men's vote for the town's popularity poll... Zzz~”

“Um, I think it's only been a grand total of five second since voting started.” And you're the only one voting.

“Morning~ Mako-tan.”

With her face still kissing the floor, she asked with an obscure voice.

“...Please call me something normal.”

How come she's the only one who keeps calling me different names? Why couldn't it be my friends or Erio? It sure would suck if it's because I'm only getting along better with my aunt.

“Mako, Mako, tan-tan.”

“Sorry for making an impossible request for my abnormal aunt.”

Each person have things they can and cannot do. There are things that are inherently impossible though.

For example, flying with a bicycle.

Or arriving here from a different planet.

And me becoming a baseball game hero.

Being able to give up easily allows for a timely life with mental stability.

Suddenly, Meme-san snapped upright. The clear red marks on her face suited that airhead look of hers. It might even help cover the wrinkles — my throat will definitely be crushed if I said it.

According to Meme-san herself, she's normal about every three years. So as far as the time I will be spending here is concerned, it'll probably never happen. Just as I casually thought of a retort, Meme-san grinned tauntingly.

As though she had read my mind, she began chatting about some seemingly irrelevant things. I've gradually adapted to her unholy ability of connecting the dots. Not because this is where aliens live, but because Meme-san herself is just such a life form. My stress has gone down significantly ever since I started thinking this way.

“Hmhmhm, time actually flows differently for me.”

“I guess, since you can never get your age right.”

“How could it be! Two birthdays a year! Meaning, I'm only half my age! What~! I'm only twenty~ Aha!”

Dude! Logic! You're being too nice! Get outta there! Please send this forty year old back! You don't want to? Really?

“In, other, words! Normal Meme will be there in a year and a half, which is when Mako-kun is going to graduate! Meme's flower will once again bloom!”

“It's already faded.”^[25]

“I will steal your heart as we part!”

“I'm already ready to part.”

A (one-person)smile-filled, happy-looking (from the side) family.

Nighttime — if it were the country where I lived, it'd be the time when frogs cry.

Probably because of the lack of farm around here, other kinds of insects

chirped about.

Reading a book Ryuushi-san lent me, I killed time under the suffocating heat. As the guest in the house, I refused to use the AC.

“.....” I've reached halfway.

Currently, I fear Australia: the southern hemisphere terrifies me. Reading a book like this deeply instilled a sense of regret in me, but at the same time, I've grown to learn how safe my life has been, being able to read a book in a room on a clean bed. Even though I am constantly harassed by a non-human like my aunt everyday, I would never trade this life away... And that'd be horrific if I can start seeing things that way. Personally, brainwashing should only be limited to being mesmerized by a girl.

I flipped over, grabbing onto the phone by the pillow. It's not like there's a new message, but I still checked the history every now and then; then, I'd grin smugly remembering the exchange between me and Ryuushi-san.

If there were mirrors scattered in this room, I'll probably be sick of my disgusting smile.

I opened up the reply to the message 'you can do it!' that I sent to her after she expressed her dissatisfaction with breakfast.

“Mom said the same thing. Are ya spyin' on the Mifune?”

Does she suspect me of planting a bug in her house?

Speaking of which, I haven't even been to Ryuushi-san's house. Only if I could visit in the future. Her room must be filled with the sweet scent of Ryuushi-san... I totally meant to say 'so what?'

Explaining kind of kills it, but what I meant to say it's tantalizing.

“Kousin.”

“Hah?” A familiar, futon-covered voice summoned me from the hall.

Despite it being the middle of a tropical night, the stifled-looking monster crept into the room, enveloped in her favourite Calamus-patterned futon. On the way in, half her body bumped into the unopened door along the wall, almost tipping her over.

“What's the matter, futon roll? Sports meet at the cemetery?”^[26]

An outfit that displays perseverance without the courage test, huh. Closing the book, I sat up.

“It is tiem for stergeyzing.”

I looked up to the clock, replying, “Ah~ right, it's already the time? So what's up with that getup?”

“Bug rehelant.”

“Bug repellant? Sure, keep it on.”

With no intent of pointing out the problem, I decided to head straight out. The telescope weighing over eight kilo was carried by me; Erio, who almost fell downstairs, was also transported along. The results of not being bound by futons for twenty four hours a day seemed to be the deterioration of sensation. What a useless skill she had accrued.

I held her back and made sure she put on the sandals before she flew out. The melanin-lacking skin that looked as it'd bleed when merely touched kept a strange cold... Wait, no. Why do I gotta baby her so much? It's not like we're princess and servant. Despite complaining, I did not let go of the foot in hand.

Gazing into the sky on a summer night — certainly a good development for Youth-points, yet not so much after having to take care of the cousin who's just as circuitous as her wrapped appearance... I'm not being a worry-wart, am I?

Putting on my sandals as well, I opened up the door. As far as the distance though, we're really just going outside to the yard — the yard that is crawling with a congregation of insects. The uncanny sound, when listened closely to, was as though the sight of pure whiteness will tear at the deep part of your memories. Motionless air held the remains of day, the warmth; even the sky was clear, perfect for stargazing. Though I have to admit the expression is kind of strange when the sun was absent.

Anywhere outside of the house was off-limit to Erio, the reason being Meme-san's certain orders.

It was a dialogue from a while ago. I'm guessing it was the second Sunday of

May.

In the living room, Meme-san wagged her finger, 'tsk, tsk, tsk,' in front of Erio.

“You can't, Erio. When it's late in the city~” She paused and eyed over here for some reason. “There's a lotta hungry wolves waiting for a cute sheep like you~” I don't care if you want to scare her or something, but what was the look for, Oba(a)san?^[27]

“Wolf?”

Did she not understand the analogy? Erio cocked her head lightly. “Oh my~ Meme-san appeared ecstatic somehow.

“Ah~ You're just too darn pure! I just wanna to protect you!” She said so while squeezing Erio tightly. I would have pushed off right away, the weather being so damn hot, but Erio only seemed confused with a reddened face and didn't resist.

So Erio does love her mom, huh~ Is it because she only had a mom at home? Well, I guess for certain people the personality or appearance of a puppy is just their soft spot. But seriously... What an extreme niche.

Still, Erio is much more grounded now that her rebellious phase against the human race has passed, so at least she wouldn't disobey Meme Obaa-san anymore. No wonder she quietly accepted the curfew.

End flashback.

The stars in the sky could have only been observed with a telescope; their actual danger to her will not be on a physical level.

Truth to be told, that Erio, who has such good sleeping schedule after ditching her antic, probably wouldn't stay out late even after getting a little more confident. If I don't go with her then, hahaha... Uh, 'scue me? Why's the assumption that I have to do everything with her? Am I her legs?

With the rationale 'I'll deal with it later,' I tossed all sorts of worries aside before setting the telescope up. I'm not sure how I would feel carrying this humongous telescope on a hike anyhow, to be frank.

“Alright, alright, you're free to look at whatever you want.” Just not yourself.

“.....”

“...Hmghng!” Erio hopped about, twisting the entire futon around.

Looks like she had noticed how she is prevented from both the mosquitoes and actually looking at the stars. She should have realized the moment when she donned the thing.

According to herself, she's taking measures because she took too much damage from the bloodsuckers yesterday. Too bad she should have thought about using the bug spray.

I guess it's commendable to want to move forward by trying things on your own, but uh~ you can't see anything in that futon. Not exactly to be taken seriously when you can't even tell the directions.

Perhaps as a compromise, she stuck only her head out. People watching would probably think of water springing out of the ground like a flower or stem.

While maintaining the in-between of a youkai and a human, Erio took a deep breath. Whoever may be watching would definitely be able to enjoy her outlandish beauty; for Erio herself, she could enjoy the serenity that is being inside a futon, so it's a win-win situation for all. But, well, there was still a fundamental problem that still persist.

After her breathing exercise, Erio stared at the telescope, about to begin her next move.

“.....”

“.....”

“...Hng~” She wriggle within the futon. It would appear that she has fallen into quite the struggle, unable to use either hands. Oh boy, the road to space proved to be difficult. Who would have thought that her futon would be an obstacle?

Who would be seen as the crazy one, me or Erio, if future researchers were told that?

“Just come out quietly from the futon.”

“The cousin forcefully demanded me to strip.”

“Oh wow, looks like your tongue's just as sharp as your moms. Fine, you don't have to take it off, I mean we could just look at the stars in the futon.” I mean, it's such a wonderful planetarium and all.

Erio halfheartedly emerged from the futon; after folding it neatly, she returned the mattress back into the entrance. Finally, she began the preparation for stargazing. From below the scope, she adjusted the focus, angle and direction. I've heard that it's an arduous process for beginners, even with auto-adjustment, yet Erio's deft hands appeared experienced. The same could be said about her work at the Tamura Shop: setting conversation aside, she's quite the shopkeeper now for the most part. I suppose she's skilled in learning by experience.

Like taste-testing, Erio checked out the starry sky first; 'mm', she moved away from the telescope and smiled at me.

“It's there again.”

Her smile was also there again... Let's forget about that thought.

Out of all the planets, Jupiter is what Erio's currently following. Apparently it's easy to spot it during this season. Every now and then she look through the scope, all while sketching away on the notebook. Perhaps already used to sketching, her strokes were the perfect balance between speed and detail.



'Every now and then she look through the scope, all while sketching away on the notebook. Perhaps already used to sketching, her strokes were the perfect balance between speed and detail.'

I took a peak through the scope while Erio was drawing; an unfamiliar planet entered my vision. There wasn't much wind tonight, so the weather was perfect for stargazing. The telescope focused onto the sepia giant that would only appear slightly bigger than my eye if seen directly from Earth.

The spiral pattern on Jupiter's surface is called the 'Great Red Spot.' Erio told me so. Just what is the reason behind that whirl? She kind of explained in fragments on the first day, but I only remember half of it.^[28]

“Just a bit more; something cooler will show up.”

Erio interjected excitedly from the side.

“Oh~” Since I'm not the fanatic of space here, my response was only impassive.

I'm more of the deep-sea camp: compare to a surrealistically large world, I like the one that has an ending to the many mysteries — I guess for people like me, our dream has to be somewhat realistic.

Observing clearly a planet that no men has ever stepped on simply felt fantastical. I would even go as far as saying that it is no different than looking through a long tube that has pictures of Jupiter and its satellites printed and stuck on the end. Carelessly I blurted this out three days ago, promptly disappointing Erio; her obvious sigh seemed to convey 'what is this idiot saying?' Her upset expression while looking down on me was refreshing, and I guess a compliment like 'the cousin's lack of imagination is impressive' isn't exactly common either. The price to pay for not having a filter was the abundance of rare reactions.

I predicted the time when Erio stopped sketching, retracting my body like a hand during mochi-making. I am hanging out with her for sentimental purposes, but I have no love for the stars; still, it's not like I'd be doing much of anything aside from reading or watching TV if I were to refuse her offer — and I will definitely not be studying. So, from the point of 'meaningful' alone, my options

don't necessarily differ.

As a side note, Meme-san joined us on the first stay, but she was annihilated by the mosquitoes, so while scratching and rubbing ointment on, she declared 'ahh, my pheromone is not only effective with Mako-kun, but with the bugs too... I'll repent for my sins!' Now she's staying indoor, lazing about where the AC's blasting.

As if unable to stand my spacing out, a synthetic ring tone squeaked from the open windows in my room on second floor. It sounded like a retro, rotary-styled phone, just shorter in duration. I realized immediately what it was.

Without looking away, Erio simply spoke.

“Phone call?”

“No, a mail.”

“From whom?”

She's being nosy somehow. “...Ryuushi-san.” Probably — most likely. Though it might also be Maekawa-san, she's also a person who'd rather call than type when she's got business. Besides, she probably wouldn't even call about the game until at least two days later.

And I've already agreed to play in the game in two days, thanks to the rice balls for breakfast and other things. And here I am thinking that kids who'd get kidnapped for food were extinct... Well, if men tricked by the feminine wile of women never disappear, than I will gladly change my thought on that.

“Ryuushi...”

She repeatedly mumbled the name, but only the pencils rustling on paper followed. It's only natural, seeing how she and Ryuushi-san had a bit of history. The danger of making friends with Erio while being in the local school — perhaps that's what she understood.

For Erio, I'm afraid it's simply withdrawal that's causing her to be so shy.

“Cousin.”

Without looking away from the telescope, Erio directly spoke my name.

“Hm?”

“When will you be on TV?”

“Who are you talking about?”

It's pretty depressing that that response came before 'what are you talking about.' Do I not have any hope for myself on a TV debut? Like I said, I'm just... Hm, I think I said something along the line before...

“The cousin said, baseball in the morning.”

The conversation from this morning was revived from the graveyard of memories. Is she that interested in it? I refuted that thought right away.

“If they had time for some guys by the river, they'd probably go to the local high school team.” It's around the same time of year, too.

“Mm~” She pondered... Or at least, looked so. So that was just a way to cut into the actual topic?

“The cousin plays near the river. Amateur baseball?”

“Yeah, you've seen them before.” Erio nodded; her forehead knocked on the telescope. For the next moment she re-adjusted the angle before turning to face me. Her eyes, like the stars, glittered.

“The shopping district team?”

“Yep.” The city side probably don't want me anyway. They got enough people too.

And being on the different side with people I know is also kinda... I hadn't plan on wasting my morning hours on creating resentment or building walls.

Erio moved her face away from the telescope. From the stars above, her eyes returned onto the horizon — me. The eyes that gleamed like the surface of water made me thought that, even with heavy scrutiny, will reflect neither the scenery nor me.

She held tightly her tiny fists. On her face was the same expression when she declared her desire to work.

Next, Erio phrased the line.

“Next time, can I go too?”

The white ball tumbling to the third base replayed in my mind.

“...Baseball?”

“Is it yakyuu, or baseball? Base~ ball~?”^[29]

Why did she go as far as involving English? Wait, that's not the problem.

Erio... Wants to join team game. Is being surprised a fair reaction? What's happening?

An abstract feeling of anxiety. Like startled by the flapping of insect wings or screeches, my feet lost their holding. I feel like I want to go tell Meme-san myself. Why? Why do I feel this way?

It's not the same as the brain-numbing kind, but the guts-wrenching type. It was as if my bowel were filled with some unbelievable things.

Though not quite discomfort, this unknown sensation spreading across my body scared me.

Well, I don't have a reason to refuse. I can't say the same for others, however.

“I'll ask them. Well, um, hm, it's probably okay though. Yeah.”

“Thank you.”

The words of appreciation, that sounded like syllables put together and read separately. A voice like a text-to-speech, and a face like that — it's only natural that people thought she was an alien. If she never loudly proclaim herself as otherwise, wouldn't people all agree that she's an extraterrestrial life form? She is, in all seriousness, a person of many esoteric traits.

But setting all that aside.

Erio, she's...

Not just asking about baseball, right? There must be another reason. She's even asked to see if I was on the shopping district's team, and that must be related to that other reason.

I don't plan on getting to the bottom of it — I actually want to forget about all this, now that I might imagine of what Erio would look like standing next to that river bank. It's the only way I could hold back whatever that is coming out of my

chest.

After that, Erio soundlessly gazed at Jupiter; the notebook, too, went untouched.

It ended. From her own will, Erio concluded the session.

Following the observation of Jupiter, we viewed the closest satellite — in other words, the moon. Much more interesting than Jupiter, it is my preference. When I'm done watching the moon, I'll probably retreat back into the Touwa household.

Erio will probably mess around with the stars for about an hour more afterward. Since I worry about the humidity of the night along with the bug bites, and also the feeling of being in her way, I will withdraw.

Erio set the telescope toward the moon. Watching her movement made me think of operating a machine gun or something. Meanwhile, I swatted at the bugs flying about.

“Done.” As always, reporting to me was Erio-san. “Kay.” My nonchalant nod indicated comprehension. Now with a serious face, Erio looked at the telescope.

Then her eyes exploded.

The mouth that was shut tightly opened up, 'ah.'

“What's the matter?”

I mindlessly asked.

The next words didn't sound big or interesting.

At least for me, it's something that could be brushed aside with an 'oh.'

Yet, Erio...

As if spirited away, she slowly and firmly bit down on her mouth.

Like reuniting with a person lost amidst the city.

A soundless, formless surprise was upon us.

In the eyes that seem to imitate planet Earth, she drawled out the truth.

“Something, flashed by the moon.”

'Kay, two days later.

A battle for our burning youth... And the day of game that has nothing to do with any of that.

Erio, who woke up early, wrapped her upper body with a futon, standing in the middle of the hall like a statue.

“Poff, poff” She said something. I don't plan on translating so I'll just refer to it as 'poff, poff.'

“What's with the outfit?” Is it happening again?

“Ser er dern't hert if er gert hert.”

“So I don't hurt if I get hit?” It's easier to interpret this one, so I wanted to see if I could use it as practice for the English exam.

“Poff, poff.”

“You'll hurt other people's head. Strip!”

“Poff!”

She puffed up her chest (futon) in rebuttal. I used force to dismantle the futon. Shouldn't you have grown up? Is futon the only solution you have to problems? “Alright, there ya go.” After pulling the bedding off her, I nudged her down the stairs. “Uwah~” A dissatisfied Erio yearningly looked back at the futon, but her feet never stopped.

I will make sure she has her shoes on today. We're not racing in a grade schooler's fifty-meter, so we got to have shoes on. With that belief in mind I looked to her, yet she pouted in contempt, 'eh~?' while regarding the shoes next to her feet. I mean, I know she's someone who can casually walk outside when it rains — she doesn't even use an umbrella if she's alone. Does she not care about getting dirty?

It's a slightly different value from the common people. Well, part of it is also similar to others... No wait, that'd confirm the theory that Erio's an alien. As someone who denies the idea, I can't be doing this.

More basically, I am someone who doesn't believe in the supernatural unless something extraordinary happens.

The self-diagnose is probably correct. Despite it being about myself, it is still intriguing to know how little I actually understand.

Coming out to the yard, I dragged the bicycle out of the shack. Then, as though 'combining,' Erio sat into the basket; intentionally letting it slide, I moved the bike out. The pedals were heavier than two days ago; despite them being less than light, however, I somehow felt at ease.

We reached the bank with nothing in particular along the way. I first parked the bicycle a bit further away before walking down to the river where some of the shopping district team was.

Then.

“So, here's the person I wanted to bring over.”

I introduced her to everyone. Smack! I pushed lightly on Erio's back, putting her closer to them.

“P...Pleased to you...” She mumbled some words and snuffled. In her hands where a rule book 'Intro for Youth Baseball.' ...It might be a little better if you keep that hidden...

And you don't have to pretend you're the athletic kind. Erio ran behind me and watched carefully the reactions of the adults, Maekawa-san, and the opposing team. By the way, Maekawa-san was wearing a bigeye tuna outfit. Is fish trending this summer? In regard to the costume market.

However... Aside from Maekawa-san and Erio, there seemed to be something else today that captivated people's attention.

What's that? Can't be a decoration if it moves.

“It's Touwa's...” “Oh, the snack shop's...” “The person in the futon...” “Meme's daughter, huh...”

The owner of the last statement was obvious. After the commotion settled, the tanned guy in the middle took a step forward and spoke.

“Well, you play baseball?”

“I... I play right field.”

Don't bother pretending. “Not at all.” I pushed her upright head down, fixing her mistake. “Mm.” Captain tanned (Yakitori shop's manager) nodded.

“Then you take right field.” Not that he believed Erio, but probably because it is the least possible place for the ball to land in an amateur game.

Perhaps because they weren't directly involved, the adults weren't too resentful toward her.

Or maybe because for the adults, that certain 'thing' is more... Who knows.

I mean, 'it' is more for me. Once again my eyes drifted to the enemy team that's preparing for defense.

“Hmmm...”

There's someone in a space suit guarding the left field: a mysterious helper that was not here two days ago.

And it's not like she literally just returned from space.

The person capable of being Erio's toughest rival raised its gloved hand first.

“Who's that? Maekawa-san's cosplay buddy?”

“Nope, no idea who that is. Someone they found? Looks like she could jetpack to catch a home run.”

Maekawa-san remarked while staring blankly at the person. It's still a fellow cosplayer, even if they don't know each other — maybe she's just glad that another comrade showed up.

“That, is not a real space suit.” An intent Erio asserted.

“Of course not.” After all, those are pretty expensive — how would it even end up in a civilian's possession?

And even if it did, how much would it cost?

The outfit looked like it was just some similar cloth with specially painted patterns, without any real function. And there's no machine on it either. The helmet looked real, but did he make it himself? It does indeed look like a space suit from the outside.

A dude wearing a space suit, we'll abbreviate it to space man. Small framed, his movement seemed unexpectedly deft. The space suit (lookalike) and baseball mitt combination look unreal. A baseball game on the moon of Mars would probably look like that though. Strangeness instantly turned into mystery from that angle.

It might not be possible for me to pretend this to be something like 'predicting the future' with eyes shimmering like when going on a field trip to a science museum, but... Well, I don't think kids now-a-day get excited about going to places like that.

Maybe they don't care much for the unknown? I guess I still am... A kid...?

I glanced to the side at Erio; she seemed to be following the ball flying upward with the same eyes when stargazing.

“Looks like we can play a game without much problem.”

“Mm.”

Erio shut her slightly ajar mouth and nodded several times like a critter. I've never seen the TV broadcasting live baseball games when Erio's lazing around the living room, so I'm pretty sure she doesn't like baseball that much. Same goes for Meme-san.

By the way, after telling Meme-san about this. 'Alright~ Then Meme's going to play the beautiful manager!' 'No way.' What's wrong with her.

“Mm? I thought I didn't ask her to come?”

Uttering those words, Maekawa-san looked up at toward the bank; I too followed her.

A diminutive girl sat on a light motorcycle — wearing a red yukata and a pair of rubber sandals, and a construction helmet clearly in violation of many safety regulations, it's a young girl whose licensed status was dubious at best.

I recall seeing her playing ball here before. From her vehicle to clothing and appearance, a girl lacking in uniformity — much like a grade schooler's palette. Noticing Maekawa-san down below, she cast a smile.

Um, about the person sitting behind her.

“Eh~ It's Niwa-kun!”

Holding a basketball and attired with the whole set of gym clothes, Mifune Ryuushi-san, with a safety helmet on her head, was riding along on that bike.

“Yaho!” Ryuushi-san slid down the hill on her heels. “Oh man, this is gonna be good.” Maekawa-san looked over mischievously while Erio took a step back cautiously. I don't understand the intention either, but she pinched my arm lightly.

“What?” Even though I looked back at her face, our eyes didn't match. The pair of aqua-coloured eyes stared straight at Ryuushi-san.

“Hey? Is here fine?”

The girl in yukata on the bank confirmed with Ryuushi-san. “Yep! Thanks!” With a wave of hand, Ryuushi-san walked away. After that, the motorcycle left.

“Mmmm...” Ryuushi-san, whom I've not seen for five days, stood in front of me with overflowing displeasure. She might just threw the ball at me like at a wall. Or maybe dunk the ball on me. I got that she's mad, but why?

Maybe she dislikes sports that aren't basketball? No... She's more than excited about volley ball during PE. As I restart the thought, Ryuushi-san looked to Maekawa-san. She just stood with a grin; Ryuushi-san ignored the tuna with legs. Then those who are playing ball on the field: a total of two classmates. No youth here. Now she gets it. When she finally noticed Erio, for just a moment, her face twitched slightly; yet she starting pouting.

“Y'all are playing baseball.”

“Yeah, we are.”

“Maekawa-san's here, and, uh... Touwa-san too.”

“Yep, that's us.” She's more like Tunakawa-san at the moment.

“Niwa-kun's didn't invite me! Just me!”

Ryuushi-san flailed her hands around like she doesn't know who to pass the ball to — her upper half turned into an angry child.

Oh, is this what's happening? But since when did we have this unbalanced

friend group? Felt like we're a four-people group looking for aliens. Maybe Ryuushi-san's a little confused about something? I was actually the only one who was invited originally, so accusing me of excluding anyone is just a little inaccurate. Just as I sent SOS to Maekawa-san, she's already moved on onto the space suit on the left field. She even exclaimed, 'Maybe I'll wear an Ali*n suit tomorrow.' Some sort of meaningless sense of rivalry in that monologue.

“No no no, I wasn't excluding you.” I'm going to have to explain it myself. “Hmph~” “That was meant to be special treatment.” The hell am I saying? A lie full of so much crap, and I just threw it at Ryuushi-san's face. And then Ryuushi-san... “Eh? I'm special?”

Wha? She took the bait? She just bit onto the word 'special?' As expected of Ryuushi-san and her complex for normalcy. With eyes wide open, her tanned face beamed with a grin.

“Doku doku.” An onomatopoeia for her state of mind... I hope it doesn't become real.

“Wasn't that an expression for things overflowing?”

“Doki doki + Waku waku.”^[30]

“Why does something so positive sound so bad?”

Ryuushi-san is above the laws of arithmetic.

“So, what made you come, Ryuushi-san?”

An equally prominent question was ‘who’s the girl in yukata?’ but this takes priority.

Ryuushi-san suddenly lowered her shoulders.

“Er, self-practice. There’s a basketball hoop there, ya see.”

Ryuushi-san’s finger pointed slowly toward where the motorcycle left. “Oh~” That’s pretty impressive — I had no clue that she’s so dedicated to her club that she’s willing to practice on her own.

“So who’s that?”

“A lady from around. She’s was on her way somewhere so she gave me a

ride.”

“I see.” ...A lady? “You’re pretty dedicated, huh.”

“Well, um, y’know... Uh...”

“Hm?”

Ryuushi-san wriggled about, her hands twisting the ball.” Mm~” She mumbled.

“I thought, ya know, if Niwa-kun’s gonna cheer for me, I gotta step up and stuff.”

“Oh...”

Debble Ofadorable Ness. That’s a typo from being so shaken. The devil of adorableness shone brightly, making me choke ceaselessly.

For just a moment, I was so impressed that I forgot to breath.

But it did not last long.

“The cousin, cheer?”

Erio, who was so far silent, interjected. “Hm.” I affirmed first before taking a side glance at Erio. No expression — something seemed a little off.

Ryuushi-san appeared to be taken aback by that attitude as well; just when she’s stuttering, about to ask Erio something ‘Um...’ the parts on her face froze.

Her eyes stuck to something behind me; the half-opened mouth and the tongue inside simultaneously drew a breath. At the same time of my bewilderment, I looked behind toward the field. Though there were plenty of people practising there, out of all of them only one was staring at something other than the ball, so it was easy to figure out.

It’s Nakajima. He stared past me, at Ryuushi-san. “Hi.” He smiled awkwardly and greeted with his gloved hand. Ryuushi-san too, stiffly raised her hand and frantically looked back and forth between me and him.

“Um... Is it complicated?” An ex? I choked before the words came out.

“F-friends, ‘cuz we’re both in basketball club, Nakajima-kun and I.

Ryuushi-san asserted emphatically, as though accentuating. It's not a great feeling, when someone sounds like she's making an excuse when she's trying to hide something. Well, not like there's any reason to explain to me anyway, so even I'm a little awkward now that she's giving me special treatment.

Nakajima and Ryuushi-san looked away from each other unnaturally.

Silence loomed timely over the field.

The air around fought for warmth, wrapping me like a soft film.

Next to me were Ryuushi-san, Erio, and, even if I wanted to skip her... Maekawa-san.

Is this... The eye of the storm? A tempest seemed to prowl for a chance to lay waste on the field.

"...Oh boy."

As though sucked in by a whirlpool, a plethora of people gathered at this amateur baseball game.

The worn-out field next to the river, filled with mysteries, fantasies, and idleness.

Holding tightly onto the Youth-points flying away, I looked skyward.

There's a bit of cloud today: a comfortable weather unsuitable for star gazing.

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I did think about what might end up happen, but the game proceeded without further problems. Bonk! The crisp sound reverberated one after another — of course that'd never happen: it's still the usual gloomy routine. Whether it be Maekawa dad's side-throw or Hanazawa-san's softball style, the ball never met with the bat. Hanazawa-san aside, did Maekawa dad play baseball? I should ask him about it someday.

Because of these two's pitching warfare, the ball never went the right field where Erio stood dumbfounded. Astronaut suit of the enemy team also did nothing at the left field. Both sides did show how beautiful a missed swing look, however.

After the fiasco, Ryuushi-san said nothing but pouted. With heavy steps (when her gait is uneven) she headed to practice basketball. ‘Imma make you cry during the game, Niwa-kun!’ I don’t know if it’s a taunt or a show of spirit, but somehow I’ve become her opponent. But am I despicable, shutting up despite knowing the fact that her upset was used as a façade to cover something up? It’s gotta have something to do with... Nakajima, right?

“I see...” Indeed, something worse would happen if I was upfront about it.

Nakajima stole a look here, so I smiled in courtesy.

Okay, on the second half of third inning, Touwa Erio assumed her first batting. On the opposing team, Nakajima and Hanazawa-san focused onto Erio. Sharply. Piercingly. Erio cowered in presence of those seemingly inevitable gazes, but she still put on the helmet and entered the batter’s box. Her ‘Baseball for Beginners’ lay on my hand in the resting area. She hunched her back; her overflowing hair covered her face, making me wonder if she could even see the ball. She reminded me of a rich kid from a certain manga.^[31]

Standing on the pitcher’s hill, Hanazawa-san squinted at Erio. Those were the eyes when you see something alien. Hanazawa-san must have been involved too. Her act of exhale of as though releasing something built up. Then came the first ball from that looped pitch. Erio obviously watched the ball land without swinging the bat. The heavy thud was like the ball had stabbed into the mitt.

“Does Touwa know the rules?”

Next to me, Tunakawa-san watched the umpire’s exaggerated pose, while impassively tilting her head to the side. It’s a rhetorical question, but I still worried over the fact that I could only say ‘I wonder too.’

“Oh, I made some sandwiches for today.”

“Oh~” Much appreciated. I still think that if you at least made your dad’s portion as well, the predicament wouldn’t be as bad.

I once again focused back onto the field.

Hanazawa-san’s second pitch. “Kyah!” Erio took an early step and threw her weight into the bat without any apparent analysis to the trajectory.

“Whoah!” I shot up — the bat connected. The bat’s tip grazed the ball and, albeit weakly, sent it flying back. This was the very first time in this game where the white ball was ever sent toward the outer field.

Regardless, it was just a typical and lacklustre ball that flew above the left field. Lightly running and closing the distance, the space man rose his left glove with ease, as if saying ‘I got this.’ Yet, just when I thought Erio’s done for; just when all hope’s been given up —

Bonk.

That ordinary, high-flying ball went by the glove and landed straight onto the space man’s face. Or, uh, that, um, helmet’s plastic part... The rim? I’ll figure it out later. Anyway, the ball was sucked into that spot, and the space man collapsed slowly. Like the practice target at a Hawaiian tourist shooting range, he fell backward with his face up. No sign of waking up. The man in charge of mid field frantically ran toward the space man the ball; Hanazawa-san, standing on the hill and watching where the ball went, did not react to her teammate’s mistake, merely swiping the sweat on her forehead.

Successfully arrived at first base, Erio seemed to also have noticed the incident and stopped. She tilted her head and froze, apparently confused by what’s happened. But from the shopping district’s side of the resting area came the shouting of ‘run, run!’ A stupefied Erio glanced between the resting area and the alien; baffled, she once again ran forward. As the space man continued to be dazed, Erio stepped over second base, than third base. At that precise moment, the mid fielder picked up the ball, while keeping an eye on the fallen space man, passed the ball back. Erio stopped at home plate.

On the other side, the space man was carried off into the resting area by two other players. Someone finally decided to remove the helmet, but the space man resisted.

The space man absolutely refused to show his face, choosing to maintain this surreal scene. Was it the same kind of dedication Erio has for her futon?

Perhaps worried that she’d hurt someone, Erio anxiously looked between the bench where the space man lay and my face— look, I’m not your guardian!

Fine. I concede that your actual guardian isn’t exactly useful outside of serious

situations. I saw how she was playing mah-jong on her phone recently. “Meme wants summer va-cay too~!” She so exclaimed to the old lady at the Tamura shop, only to be riposted, ‘You seemed even dumber than when you’re young.’ Her fit was only further exacerbated. In a negative way, I suppose people around her really can’t tell her age.

My digression will end here. Due to Erio’s endless barrage of aid-seeking attacks, I stood up from my seat. “Transfer student?” “I’ll be right back.” Ignoring Maekawa-san’s gaze, I strode toward the opposite resting area. Affected by me, Erio too left third base and followed. Hey! You’re going to be outed! I thought that, but people who’d willing to make contact with Erio are probably few in number; hence she easily made it past the players of the other team.

“It’s not your fault. Probably.”

I comforted her first. “Mm...” Erio kept on a sad expression.

“...Ah.” Shoot. Upon the sudden realization I looked around. I can’t believe I so casually moved with Erio. Hanazawa-san and Nakajima are here, too. Just as I feared, the two of them stared wide-eyed at me and Erio. Within the eyes mixed with disquiet, I saw the darkness after summer.

I let my guard down. My habits took over. But wait, isn’t it more of a miracle that the rumour of Erio sitting inside my bicycle’s basket hasn’t become widespread?

Erio herself seemed to not care about the stares, trotting along behind me... Well, I’ve already made up my mind about this.

Without further doubt, I kept forward at the same pace.

We peeked into the resting area; the people surrounding let us in, so we closed in deeper.

Looking down by the bench; the alien lied there, limbs spread, but still reacted to us by turning his head.

He seems to be suffering from heat stroke, wearing that seemingly suffocating mask. Even with it on, people could tell the person inside is heaving heavily; perhaps dehydrated, he hacked several time with his entire body

convulsing.

Probably guilt-tripped further by the tragic sight, Erio's eyes trembled.

"I'm... Sorry."

A quivering Erio bowed apologetically. Despite being immobilized, the space man squeezed out a reply as if in labour.

"Do-not- wor-ry."

"...Hah?"

From deep within his guts emitted a modified voice that sounded like it's to protect the speaker's identity. The degree of realism he reproduced made me wonder if there really was a machine inside. I don't understand why anyone would go as far this.

"....." I couldn't help but look to Erio.

Erio froze too — not because she was moved to tears by the chance meeting with another extraterrestrial being. I am already used to this. It's not even a spectacle any more. Even if aliens were to show up and take over the town like, or if UFO's decide to destroy the town like a Fujiko F. Fujio comic, I wouldn't be surprised.^[32]

Why is this town filled with freaks? And you even come regularly. Are you guys mid bosses in a game?

"You got this! Ex-alien." I testing nudged Erio, our ace, forward. "Cousin, um..." The sudden recommendation locked Erio up; she threw countless glances at me. "You can do it." I forced her to have a face-to-face with him.

Would there be some chemical reaction? I had hope. And the evasive thought of 'please stop throwing people like this in my way.'

"What-is- this-?"

"A friend."

"Friend?" He only hesitated for a moment, 'what-is- this-?' before starting to feel Erio's head. "Uwahwah!" Unused to people's touch, Erio reacted incomprehensibly like speaking without any teeth.

“Ph-ew.”

“I don't think you have to insist the pause in a 'pew.'”

Plus you need that air now.

The space man ignored my advice, staring at Erio's face. Just then...

“You-ap-pear-to- be-an- in-habi-tant-of- XXXXXX-”

“Wha?” “Eh?”

“Are-you- involved-in- the-case?”

The space man took off with the topic, leaving my and Erio's reaction in the dust.

What was that made-up word he said? Don't tell me: it was an alien language he made up? This is bad — he's not messing around. If he's sicker than Erio with her futon, I'm not going to be able to handle this.

Actually, I don't even have to listen to this guy: I just thought that somehow Erio will be dragged into this space man's fantasy. For my personal harmony, I'll pretend this never happened.

“What was that, just now?”

Naturally, I think, Erio didn't understand the space man's words, requesting a repeat. However, he continued on.

And for some reason his words and gaze directed to me.

“As-for- the-individual- there...” From that point on, a normal, somewhat raspy voice of a teenage girl surfaced. Wait, that's a girl in there? Well, I guess from her physique that should have been the assumption. “Ah, wait. Time out.” Her natural voice came out; she coughed violently with her right hand blocking Erio's eyes. Apparently that was too much for her, the voice. It's on the same level as forcing yourself to laugh like ke~ ke~ ke. In the end, while watching this whole thing play out with the help of humidity, I caved. The stupidity of trying to deal with her pierced my spine.

“Ah~ ah~” Sitting up now, the space girl who ignored the stale atmosphere surrounding her completed the adjustment of her voice. She stuck her thumb at

her chest and boasted.

“Thanks-for- waiting. Come-at- me.” She'd recovered — and was getting on my nerve.

The space girl kept the mimicry while identifying herself.

“I-am- an-es-per.”

I'm an esper. I recalled the creature that had to karate-chop its own neck to speak like that.^[33]

A esper descends once again.

“Ahhh~”

It's been a while since I get to end with this. May I? I may. So, here it is.

“Oh, is that so?”

- 早朝草野球(+前川さんのおにぎり)。 +2
 - エリオの世話を焼く(何故かその度に減っている気がする)。 -1
 - リュウシさん可愛い。 +2
 - 新手のSパーと遭遇。 -3
-

現在の青春ポイント合計 +8



Chapter 2 - The Boy's Strange Summer

Around the time of fifth grade, I joined the local youth football team.

The team wasn't in a tournament or anything, and frankly speaking it's not too different than playing a game of kickballs after school.

At the time, football was all the rage among us boys who couldn't care less about trends. Even the girls who took joy in competing were mixed together with them, sending the ball here and there. Affected by the air of 'if you don't play, you have no friends' I naturally pretended to be interested and joined the them.

Since it's a team effort, my parents were often preparing drinks or snacks under the bridge, be it hot or cold. I bet they actually didn't want to do it — I now realized just how incredible they were.

Back then, I only cared about other things.

So, I joined a team. All's well — except, did I really try to play the sports? The answer, as obvious as it is, is simply a no.

I had totally no chance of appearing in a game when we were playing against other teams. The coach hated me. Just kidding: I just sucked.

In terms of practising, I consider myself dedicated. During the weekend, or when school's out, I spent most of my time training, as much as my friends did. But to admit the brutal truth, I was simply not cut out for the sport.

Little by little, I noticed that I wasn't as good as the other boys. Was it because my legs aren't as nimble? Who knows. In any case, I was no good: when I mimic others, my movement became rigid; the difference in our abilities made me wonder if I was dreaming.

Another possible reason was, perhaps, a common thing for youth football: rather than defence, most kids want to be in the forward position, resulting in

more competition. Like going to a high school with low acceptance rate, I stood no chance.

After half a year, I was still a backup; my uniform was much cleaner than the others'.

My parents had to come all the way here for their kid who won't even be playing, and to take care of other children — I was mortified.

In the end, I left after a year.

Oh, there's another reason. I just didn't feel envy watching other people play on the field any more. Hm, I probably came to accept it long before.

I wonder if it was at that time that I've become hesitant to try things far beyond my own abilities.

And so I gave up on the athletic aspect and joined the arts and craft club in middle school.

...Why did I choose that club? Even for myself, it's a riddle yet to be solved.

After getting hit by Erio's ball, the space girl returned to the field. The old guy that appeared to be her caretaker tried to stop her, but gave in when she said something along the line of 'my esper power grants me invincibility.'

She looked okay, so I didn't want to be further involved. With that over, Erio and I left her to continue the game.

I went back to our resting area, and Erio to the third base.

With feet dragging, Erio never changed that gloomy look.

As a side note about the game, if we talk strictly about results, it'd be two losses in a row.

... And the day after Erio's first match in the amateur baseball game.

The girl who still wore the space suit look-a-like stood in the batter's box.

If she swung the bat, she might create a space rift — that's what the picture suggested. Standing on the pitcher's hill, Maekawa dad also seemed bemused, kicking at the dirt. He doesn't seem to be resilient to pressure, as the game suggested. Once someone made a hit, he messes up easily. In baseball video

game term, it's like danger x or runner x... Still, being the ace, huh. That's badass. [34]

And I guess, just like last time, Maekawa dad could sense the overwhelming aura emanating from that opaque visor.

The girl in space suit who descended to the river bank was rumoured to be an esper.

Oh wow, so cool. That explains nothing though.

“What is that?”

I asked Hanazawa-san, who's spacing out on first base after the fish store's owner messed up. A teammate might have some insight into this, right? At the peak of my excitement, she flatly said, 'dunno.'

Hanazawa-san's also in her uniform today. Needless to say, the men were always staring around her waist when she pitches.

“Nakamura-san — oh, he's our catcher — brought her yesterday. A relative or something. I heard other people say she was messed up the farm or she ran away from home.”

“...A relative?”

“Well, don't really know. Don't care either way.”

Still dubious of the space girl, Maekawa dad threw his first pitch to her. She put all her strength into the bat and swung directly into the air thirty centimetres above the ball. It was a bad miss on the same tier as Erio's. I've thought about this the other day too, but can she even see well through that helmet?

The entire time Hanazawa-san hadn't shown a speck of intention to leave the first base, only listlessly rubbing her head. She totally had no plan to steal the base, nor the will to move onto the next.

If she's so unmotivated, why did she come?

“That aside, what's your deal with that?”

Hanazawa-san crudely pointed with her chin. The direction she pointed to, on

the far left field, was Erio with her gloved hand raised in preparation. Continuing from yesterday, she's also a baseball player today (self-appointed).

Since I've been seen together with Erio yesterday, there was no way I could just gloss it over today. If I were keep quiet or try to to hide it, our relationship might even end up being muddled. My school life started to crack.

“She's my cousin.”

“...Oh.” A slight delay before a disinterested reply. A gruelling pause before a boring reply. I'm not exaggerating — that really kind of sucked. Sure is nice that Erio wasn't around~ I distracted myself with the thought.

Hanazawa-san leaned forward to observe more closely. Erio didn't notice her gaze, busy adjusting her posture and her arm's angle... Oh, she's blocking the sun with her glove?

“You don't look alike. At all.” Hanazawa-san mumbled while looking at Erio's face.

“She's my cousin.”

“Cousins don't look alike?”

“It's kinda hard when you're only distantly related, you know?”

If I look like Erio, the amount of youth points would probably crack me up. It'd be a far cry from my current situation. Well, it isn't that bad now that I've met Ryuushi-san and Maekawa-san. Or rather, I'm very glad about it.

“Oh... In other words, you're related to that?”

Hanazawa-san doesn't refer to Erio as 'Touwa' or 'Erii.' Not that the latter is ever possible.

Seeing Maekawa dad's second pitch end up as a ball in the catcher's mitt, I shot a side glance at Hanazawa-san. She's already looked away from Erio, now at Maekawa dad's direction.

“I guess it is a turn off, huh.” Erio and I being related.

“A little. It's hard to treat someone fairly if he's related to a weirdo, you know? But if it's just 'being on the opposing team,' then it's not really a

problem.”

After speaking without a single pause, she looked to the resting area. In that direction, we saw Maekawa-san, as she'd promised, in an alien costume.

“Maekawa is an exception though.”

“Are you going to tell people at school?” And just what did I expect her to say?

Hanazawa-san's face twisted slightly — it was definitely not a friendly sign.

On the pitcher's hill and in the batter's box, the third ball leading to a strike stirred up both a good and bad reaction.

“Not intentionally, but I might just if me and my friends ran out of things to say. Like, 'I've heard this from a little bird,' that kind of thing. So sorry, if that ever happens.”

“That's fine, I guess.” Realistically it isn't, but it's hard to deny her that right.

Meme-san said it too: it's probably only because Erio is cute that I, as a guy, care about her. I wonder if that's the case. A sense of self-deprecation poked out.

Hanazawa-san raised her chin and stared back at Erio. And then.

“I've only been in class with that for about two months though.”

“Hm?” She'd been calling Erio 'that' since the beginning, and that piqued my interest.

“To be honest, other girls have been jealous of her since way before then... Whether it's the hair, or her face.”

After seemingly talking to herself, she dashed out. Not toward the second base, but her own resting area. Looking carefully, the space girl had fallen right at the batter's box after being struck out. Oh, it's time to switch.

Not that it's important, but Nakajima wasn't among the other team.

I recall that Ryuushi-san's attitude yesterday wasn't as though 'it's super bad!' or anything. Neither did it seem like I have a match or something.

Erio, who had done nothing for defence, came running toward the resting

area — no, me.

Like a puppy with a Frisbee in its mouth coming back to its owner.

I know, too, though that I was the only person she belonged with on this river bank ...Haah. Hmm? For some reason, both a bitter smile and a sigh covered my face.

“It's not hard to deal with, but...”

But it's just a pain, maintaining your social status. Those who can are certainly impressive.

Just like that, we lost again today. The shopping district is now on a 3-loss streak. The seedling of victory did not grow.

Hanazawa-san completed the match with no hits and no runners. It's a little too embarrassing even for an amateur game. She was the only one with the same ridiculous power like a baseball manga protagonist.

Unless Hanazawa-san quits or if we undergo enhancement surgery by some shady doctor, we don't have a chance of escaping the status quo. This position filled me with deja vu of the time when I played football, and to be honest I'm not fond of it.^[35]

“Transfer student.”

The xenomorph arrived. It should have been a sight to flee from, but knowing the person inside is the embodiment of bean sprout, I stayed.

It's hot in the morning too, huh. Maekawa-san's face tinted red with heat radiating. 'Just take the thing off.' Is it not tactful to say that? And, is she even wearing anything inside? I wonder.

“What's up?” Without stopping the cleaning motion, I engaged her.

“I just came to say, good job today as well.”

“Thanks, but I still didn't hit the ball today.”

'I'm embarrassing as hell' I jokingly said that out loud. As though she's seen through it, Maekawa-san quietly smiled. Having someone of my age do this to me was as if being pointed out how immature I am. Now, I'm actually

embarrassed.

As I tried to cover it up by cleaning even harder, Maekawa-san began scrambling inside the xenom*rph and pulled something out. The object that came from a slightly unsettling place was...

“Here, your breakfast.”

“Oh hoh~” The primary reason of why I came. I received the package. Everything, aside from where it came from, was perfect.

Oh man. It's a rectangular item inside the silver aluminium foil wrap. Is it a sandwich?

In any case, it's a waste to give this to someone whose morning had been a blur.

“Um, Maekawa-san.”

I circled in front of Maekawa-san and stood straight. “Mm?” As if trying to understand the friendly alien, the xenom*rph tilted her head with a gentle smile.

“What is it? If you're being so proper.”

“Well, I'm just very happy. Thanks again.” I raised the food.

Something made by a girl. It's an indescribable sense of fulfilment — it might even be the last time ever.

...I hope not. It's pretty sad how I can't deny the possibility entirely.

“Yep.” Maekawa-san nodded readily, but I thought her face flushed ever redder. It was quite the occasion.

Was she embarrassed from being praised?

Seeing how I'm usually the one being played by her strange acts, this might just be a rare Maekawa-san.

I wanted take a bunch of pictures with my phone, but since the ratio of the xenom*rph to human will be higher, I gave up on that thought.

“I guess they didn't call you the womanising transfer student for nothing.”

“I felt like something terrible was very casually attached onto my name.”

“Forget that for now. Don't you have something to do?”

In a strangely cheery mood, the xenom*rph Maekawa-san changed the topic while pointing toward the outfield. “Ah.” I peaked behind Maekawa-san.

“Uwah~!” Erio was being chased by the esper-space girl.

The space girl, who should have had nothing to do with cleaning up, chased behind Erio as if trying to befriend her. She caught up to Erio while keeping a low profile; her dexterous gaits were actually pretty amazing — as impressive as those of the folks on the street spreading words of their religions.

Unable to break off, Erio sent me glances for help; halfway through, she started mouthing words too. She's saying 'please help me, cousin.' She's too needy.



'Unable to break off, Erio sent me glances for help; halfway through, she started mouthing words too. She's saying 'please help me, cousin.' She's too needy.'

I hoped she'd never beg for help like that... Because then I would have to help.

Ahhh... But if I do, my youth points...

Futilely, I looked over to Maekawa-san.

“Do I have to?”

“Aren't you Erio's guardian?”

I'm her what? She gave me this disapproving look. Is this how people see me? Her actual guardian would never be present, so I guess it can't be helped.

Erio's SOS signal never ceased even as the excuses, or rather explanation, in my head spun.

“Sigh...” I let out a sigh inappropriate for such a fresh morning and redirected myself.

“Have fun~” Under the blessing of a dull cheer, I dragged the rake and jogged ahead. If possible, I would like to hurl this thing into the river.

It's not likely though, with these arms. Can any high schooler throw something like this perfectly?

To make sure I don't ruin my food, I steadied my movement while going toward Erio and the space girl. In an instant Erio's face cleared from gloom to bloom, and she fled this way; since she's still holding onto a rake, she looked tired with mouth shut tight.

The space girl also reacted to me and rushed over. This space-suit wearer stood against me and, uh, made sound.

“Ho-ho- ho-ho- ho.”

“Space ninja?” Does she plan on talking like that again? If we're betting under five hundred yen, I'd wager that her throat will die.^[36]

“We-are- esper.”

There's another one. “Oi. It's your friend.” I said so to Erio, but she frantically shook her head, as if saying they aren't the same. I thought she called herself an esper too some time ago.

There were some serious changes in these past four month, huh. As I stood there contemplating over this seemingly fuzzy emotion...

“Ow!” The plastic part of a helmet rammed into my throat.

“Hand-her- over. I-must- know-why- she-is- here.”

She pointed at me and demanded for Erio, who quickly hid behind me.

I have become the futon's replacement.

Imma pounce you then! (My brain's a little shaken from being knocked)

“Nope. She's not mine, so it's not up to me.”

I replied calmly. If she was asking for Meme-san instead, I might have just said 'if you would be so kind.' But that Erio might follow wherever her mom goes, so I guess the space girl still wins.

Too shoot the man, shoot his horse — is this what the phrase meant?

“Anyway, why do you want her? Is it because of her look?”

Or was it a revenge for yesterday?

“W-what do you mean my look?”

Erio pinched my back and asked for clarification. Is she not aware of how ridiculous her appearance is? Of course people would be jealous, even if she doesn't mean it.

“She-is- an-alien.”

“Was. And you forgot the 'self-proclaimed' part.”

“@#\$%- Comrade.”

“Could you not mix foreign language in there if you insist on talking like that?”

“Actually-we- are-basically- **family**.”

“Hooray, we have a bigger family now.”

I stiffly reported to Erio, who shook her head crazily.

“My family. Only mom, and the cousin.” Eh? Me too? Well... That's fine?

As long as I am not married to Meme Obasan!

...Ahem. That aside.

This girl considered herself the same as Erio, that's why she's chasing her. Kind of like how Erio used to follow me around wrapped in futon. So, this must be karma.

It always comes back to bite you in the ass... The saying must have been created just for times like this.

“Honestly- I-don't-care- but-as- fe-l-low- aliens-on- a-fo-reign-pla-net- shouldn't-we- all-be- friends?”

“Hah? I thought you're an esper? That has nothing to do with aliens.”

I feel a bit sad knowing that I am now used to dealing with people like her. Ahh~ Eri-chan taught me quite a few things back in April... Sigh, are there going to be more people like them pop out the longer I stay here? I dismayed at the thought.

The space girl froze for a moment, and then began moving again. Vivid movements ensued whenever her mouth opened, so it wasn't that draining; however, I never wanted to interact with her in the first place.

“Also-an- alien.”

“Your settings change easily.”

“It's not a settin—! It's-the- real-deal.”

“Did your teachers call you imaginative?”

“La-la- la-la- la.”

She's playing deaf while humming some tune. “Lalala~ la~ lalala~” Erio somehow continued and sang along quietly.

“What was that melody? Did you make that up?”

“It's-a- lull-aby- for-babies- with-tails.”

“Wha? ...Oh, that, huh.”^[37]

Erio knew where it was from that one tune? I'm amazed that she was able to understand that right away.

“Aren't you two just the best buds?” Alright, your turn now. I nudged Erio toward the space girl. “Ah! Cousin! Wah! Uwah!” Amidst the chaos, I pushed Erio out; she immediately turned around and attempted to circle back behind me. To prevent that, I counter-circled behind her.

Following each others' back, we spun like coffee cups.

Or trails left by firecrackers.

What the hell were we doing? Now we look like idiot couples shining lovey-dovey aura.

“Are-you- idiots?”

“I don't need that coming from you. Have you seen yourself in the mirror?”

“An-esper- does-not- have-reflection.”

What a setting. Where did she steal it? Or did she make it up?

“Actually, I heard that you ran away from home. Just go home.”

“Har-har- har-har.” Why the American laugh? “I-am- here-for- work-you- stupid-idiot. I-don't-really- care-but- they-forced- me-to— cough! Cough!”

She choked. Hmm~ work, huh? Just like Erio back in April.

She didn't look like someone with a mental trauma or anything. I think.

“Where did you even come from? The city?”

“I just said spac— I-just- said-space. Are-you- stupid? Must-I- repeat-myself?”

“Ohh, that's right, Earth is a part of space. Right... So, uh, your outfit. That's a suit human made to go into space.”

“The-hu-man-who- visited- my-planet- wore-this- so-I- took-note- from-them- when-I- came.”

She proudly declared. I recalled the theory of 'astronauts keeping their meeting with aliens on moon secret.' Some people believed that — she must be

of one of them.

“Oh, I see.”

“Why-do- you-sound- indifferent.”

Ohoh, she could tell? At least she's more hopeful than early Erio.

“So, why are you following Erio?”

“People-of- the-same- wave-lengths- attract-one- another.”

She stuck a finger at Erio and clearly announced comradeship. Erio was now completely behind me. Rather than mutual attraction, it was more like one of them was simply being a nuisance.

“I-was- merely-jesting.”

“Your jokes aren't applicable for normal people.”

“Somehow-she- is-related- to-work- so-I- just-wanted- to-investigate.”

“...Erio is related to your work?”

Does she plan on scouting a girl with red hair and another with purple hair so they can make a rainbow-coloured idol group? As if, hahahah... So, um, what about this girl?

“Listen, you.”

“What-stupid- idiot.” Nice Earthling-style insult there you little turd.

“You don't need a space ship — your head is already in space!”

I tried to be as gentlemen-like as I can to rephrase the words 'you're a mess.' She was very upset.

“You-do- not-believe- me.”

“Isn't it about time for you to stop talking like that? You're gonna suffocate.”

I didn't have to point it out anyway; she kneeled down. Probably getting too hot in there.

“Ugh-ugh.” She's even putting pauses between her moans. Well, still alive are we? I am surprised. Time to leave. Yo~ We're leaving! I beckoned at Erio, who dropped the tool in hand and trotted over here.

“You have a freak following you.”

“N-no...” I don't know if there was a reason, but she shook her head violently.

Perhaps it was like watching herself from a year ago when she was spouting nonsense. It must be pretty cringey, having to go through this. Well, I guess it's kind of the same with having a pet rock.

“And you have to learn how to deal with her.”

“B-but I don't have my futon.”

Eh? Why did she give me that resentful glare? Oh yes, of course: I took it off. But I had never have anger directed at me for doing something like this. To be fair, though, meeting someone who's wrapped herself in a mattress was also a first for me. Well, normally it would be pretty much impossible.

“Please, futon is only for when you are sleeping.”

“T-then!” With clenched fists, she squeaked. “I will, count on the cousin.”

Ooph! Right into my strike zone. I couldn't even look at her. Thankfully, the sight of a xenomorph Maekawa-san about to head home somehow calmed me down.

For some reason, strange things that people are used to could be soothing. How weird; how mysterious...

This town is truly filled with weirdos, huh. I guess, comparatively, the only normal person is Ryuushi-san.

“Y-you already rely too much on me.” I couldn't completely hide how shaken I was.

“Yep, so I must rely, more.”

Squeeze. She plastered her face onto my arm. An indescribable chill crawled straight into the back of my brain; goosebumps.

“Cousin's arm, kind of chilly.”

“That's, uh, from the sweat drying off.”

“Uwah.”

She just ran off like that. Oh well, if she kept holding onto me, something in me will be in danger too.

I took a mindless glance behind; the space girl lied there weakly. I was a bit worried for a second, but that mister someone from the other team rushed over to her, so I stopped looking.

Who would have thought that it's Erio's turn to be afflicted? How very sentimental.

After all, she's became the denizen of a made-up planet or land inside the head of that space girl. How... Unfortunate. I had only the most disingenuous sympathy.

Whatever. I'll leave her to Erio and tried my best to pretend to not see it.

Speaking of the space girl, I don't really care if she never comes back to Earth. She's a complete and total stranger, so she can do whatever she wants in space.

Reasons for me to intervene... None. I hope.

Yet, a reason might just appear in the near future. I must be cautious.

I don't care what anybody says, this summer will be filled with only youth.

Crazy girls, need not apply till I've graduated from high school.

Joining a sports team just to go with the flow — it might be the same now.

But, I couldn't even make it onto the stage before, and here I am now, playing first bat on an amateur baseball team.

Even a satire should have limits, you know? Or perhaps it's just bad karma?

In a blur, I finished up the cleaning and took my phone out.

Alright, here we go. Recipient: Ryuushi-san. There's no one else I could bother on a whim anyway.

There is a certain forty years old with a head full of dark blue hair who's telling me in my head 'I'm here, pen pal! Or pen-lover! I'm here!' With the same tricks to playing a game of whack-a-mole, I sunk the noise. Day after day, the delusion becomes more and more realistic. She's passed her disease onto me.

'Are you at the park again today?'

Sent. As though after an eternity, the mail quickly returned.

'Secret training-ing.'

Not so secret now. As expected of an airhead. I replied.

'I'm done with baseball. Can I go watch you secret training-ing?'

Another moment. When it's supposed to be '**Now Loading**,' the reply came back.

'I will be ready with neck washed.'

She seemed to have some incredible resolution.^[38]

Did she mistake that phrase's meaning for 'tidied up?' Her Japanese's scores are okay, right? I'm still wondering about many things, but at the very least I seemed to have gotten permission.

Why is it that I want to go see Ryuushi-san practice? Well, it's because I remembered thinking about Nakajima during the game... So I thought, hey, let's go see her.

I'm totally not worried about her and Nakajima though.

As I rationalized it to myself, Ryuushi-san sent something else over.

'Is Touwa-san coming too?'

"..." Something about that mail stopped my fingers.

Was there a universal answer that was correct for everyone present?

Uh, but she's got a point. What about Erio? If she has to go home alone, it's probably a little... The Esper's around too, right? I can't even imagine she wanting to be around her.

'What if, hypothetically, she's coming with me?' I decide to beat around the bush. It's kind of like passing a turn when playing cards. Since there wasn't any movement since earlier, I turned to look for Erio; she was already waiting by the bicycle. After meeting my eyes, she waved lightly at me. At the same time, she regarded the space girl who was once again laid on the bench.

Ryuushi-san's mail came; a little scared, I opened the text message.

'Touwa-san and I are good friends, so I am fine with that. However, I suddenly have business to take care of today, so I'm afraid we can't meet today.'

An uncanny terror emanated from the message that was no different from a stiffly-translated sentence from an English textbook. Why are you scaring me like that, Ryuushi-san? Are you this year's test of courage? Um... the reply will have to wait.

Same goes for Nakajima — this should be okay, right? It's not like anything has happened yet.

I began migrating to the bicycle; once I was close, Erio climbed into the bicycle's basket. I guess making her sit in the back is simply... futile.

“So.”

“Mm? What?”

“Is baseball fun?”

“It's... it's okay.”

Her reaction was apparently an attempt to hide her embarrassment; she even looked away.

“Is it?” Either way, I just asked on a whim.

But what if she said it was boring? What would I say? It would be quite troublesome.

And, I guess it's because of both playing and cleaning, my legs and waist were tired.

I don't wanna bike any more; just send me home with your super power~

...I'm kidding. Sigh, I'm exhausted.

After finishing my breakfast from Maekawa-san, I guess I will just sleep till noon. I bet as soon as I hit the bunk, I will fall asleep.

With a smile, I unlocked the padlock while imagining giving into my desire.

“Ah... Let's go home.”

“Mm!”

As if she'd heard good news, Erio hopped in the basket. 'Disease of civilization' — ignoring what it actually means — would be the perfect, literal description of Erio, who's dependent on the bicycle basket.

I pushed the bike above the bank before began pedalling.

If that self-titled esper-slash-alien (her settings' are too complicated) is anywhere close to what she claimed to be, she should just fly home on a bicycle.

And because they can't, people like her are 'self-proclaimed.'

That's just how it will always be in this town.

Then, we'll skip till this evening. Nothing worth writing about happened in the day anyway.

This isn't too different from last year: the only thing that changed was the place, and I'm even dubious as to whether I have changed. The one thing that concerned me, though, was the fact that I'm getting used to living here.

Today, again, we watched the stars from the Touwa's yard. 'Something even better will appear.' That's what Erio said, but as of what will be evolving remained to be seen. Being clueless, I didn't really care.

It wasn't a clear night... I know the expression is poor, but what I mean is it's not entirely cloud-less. Anyhow, the weather hindered tonight's session, and Erio showed her dissatisfaction; she had not given up on the sketching, though. It's not like she had to turn this in to someone — it's just a hobby, nothing obligatory. For someone who doesn't even do schoolwork willingly, I was indeed moved by Erio's enthusiasm. Deep sea fishes are just fun to watch, not something to be discussed from a scholarly angle. Besides, I was once made fun of because I made the attempt.

It might not have been jeering, but it was enough to traumatize my young mind. And it was mortifying.

I looked up at the cloud sifting through sky that seemed to mirror the dark sea while reminiscing.

It's unimaginable, but memories that excite and encourage us don't actually

appear when we're thinking back; it's usually the painful ones that will never disappear from our mind, I thought to myself.

The wind did not chill the bone, but carried weight like the sea breeze. As comfortable as the air was, the cries of insects never calmed.

Resonating from faraway was the hollering of the ramen shop.

Meme-san mentioned to not stay out for too long, but I doubt the temperature would change that much tonight. Just for reference, what Meme-san said was as follow.

'Don't be out for too long! If Eri-chan get sick I'm going to cry! And I will skip work for you~!' Can you not use your daughter as an excuse to skip work?

She obviously really cares for Erio, but that last line just ruined everything else.

Erio looked away from the telescope and onto me, who's spacing out. Out of my sight! Erio would naturally never say that, but was she trying to encourage me?

She shut her sketchbook and held a fist in front of her chest — the sign of Erio about to announce something. Usually there would be a few seconds of pause before she speaks.

And as expected, it was five seconds this time; the melody of cries of insects and rustle of grass filled the intermittent space.

“Cousin...” After calling me that, she shook her head in refusal. “N...Niwa-kun!”

“Wha?”

Was she startled? Erio took a step back; she didn't run away. After bending forward to make our total distance further apart, she moved closer again.

“C-cousin's name, Niwa.”

“That's me all right, but what's the matter?”

“Uu... ah... Niwa-kun.”

“I know, but why? Are you trying to be like Ryuushi-san?”

Hearing that name, Erio shook her head hastily... Looks like I was right.

But what was the reason for calling me differently?

It wasn't anything out-of-the-world ridiculous, so I didn't know how to react.

Don't tell me — I am actually not her cousin! Is that the shocking truth she's trying to convey? Hm... That'd be problematic. If we weren't related, in other words adopted, that means a certain forty-some year old immersed in her hand-held video games is not my aunt.

We've accidentally discovered the legal forty-year-old route! ...I'm not that stupid.

“Did you dream up some setting you really like?”

Because of that space girl. As the older one, that's what I worry the most. Erio isn't going to have a remission, is she?

“I-it's not a setting... I think... A-awahwah!”

Erio flapped her arms in an attempt to relay something; however, she couldn't find the words. Perhaps that is what has been missing from the way she was raised.

This awkward situation in which we could not make eye contact stifled me. What's is up with the atmosphere? No one would be able to formulate a proper sentence here. Why do I have to face Erio like this? I'm going to get the wrong idea! I contemplated on suing a certain adult.

After the tension.

Did it know? Or did it shatter the air unknowingly?

Something wriggled. Conscience scattered from Erio; I looked onto the ground on which the object crawled.

Under the porch, a mysterious creature moved with the dark.

“...Hm? Hmm?”

Opening my eyes wider, it was a white object worming on the ground. Both Erio and I froze on the spot and waited for whatever entails.

UMA — the three letter word circled my mind. A nozuchi? The bounty in the

department store is still valid, right? As my thought drifted in that direction, the true identity of that thing popped in my mind.

The truth behind that white object was the look-alike space suit.

“What the!”

“This is a very nice porch. I just couldn't help it. When the people of this planet visited us, they used the same cramped bedding like this in their spaceship. When in Rome, do as the Romans.”

The space girl proudly stood up and dusted herself off. Upon seeing her, Erio bolted back into the entrance.

“Ahhh! You're that Sir stupid idiot!”

She deliberated arched backward to display surprise, and acknowledged me in an extremely rude manner. Why do I have to deal with someone like this now? I thought, but considering I am the only male in this household, I have to step up.

“How can we help you~? If you have business please refer to the doorbell at the entrance.”

“I am a space wanderer seeking asylum. Please pay me no mind.”

How does one say something so painful so easily?

“Do you think you'd let a runaway person who's been rumoured to destroy farming fields free in your backyard?”

“You're a skeptic, aren't you? You must be unacquainted with the supernatural.”

Heheh~ she humphed from her nose haughtily. I see, so there's a nose in that helmet~ Boy am I glad that she has a face. Not!

“How did you get here?”

“My power of course. My **superpower**.”

“Are you stalking us?”

“Am I suppose to weep for how lowly your brain thinks?”

She's not planning on stealing from us, is she... If she were, she would have at least changed out of that, so I don't think she is.

What she did hold, however, was an issue in disjunction to the rumoured crime she committed.

“Oh yeah, you're talking normally.”

“I used too much of my energy this morning when I was trying to emulate my natural tongue.”

“Oh, your throat's messed up.” No wonder she sounded husky.

“Hmph. I have concluded that for an idiot like you who deny the existence of super power and the extraterrestrial, using my power would be a waste... But everyone seemed to react the same way anyway... And I thought I understood how aliens are treated here...”

Her mumbling near the end never reached my ear, blocked by the helmet. Ahh~ I hate dealing with this kind of people; I can't believe I was able to with Erio.

Oh, and she's back. Or more accurately, the local youkai with a futon torso returned. She was preparing to back me up... I think? In that bowling pin costume.

If she walked into an archery club, would they mistake her for a target and shoot?

“The hell is this?” Space girl was taken aback.

“A futon roll.”

“Ghosts live in your house?”^[39]

“Hmphf.”

Futon roll and space girl had a stare down. It was a cosplay battle that you will not have the chance to see even in a fictional world. I didn't want to back either side, but my position and personal circumstances dictated that I must stand with the futon roll.

“What, do you expect to battle with me in such gear?”

“Hmphf!” Ohoh, she had confidence — unfortunately, the fact that it is based only on 'being wrapped around by a futon' already destroyed the sense of any reliability.

“In terms of Time magic, I am Meteor; in terms of special skills, I am Throw Stone. That is my level, as an esper.”^[40]

Is she the destructor of Earth or the neighbourhood brat? Even her examples sounded like what the kids around would say. This was, of course, the thought of a human unable to levitate three meters of the ground.

“Hmphf, hmphf!” Erio did not retreat, sticking her chest out further.

“Or, if we were to use the PS* system to explain, I am Star St*rm.” (TL Note: Referring to the Star Storm skill in Mother 3) The rock was in a pinch.

Moreover, is it even considered a power to just throw rocks at people? Even I can be an esper starting from tomorrow then. I guess I will start with bouncing rocks on the water.

“So what exactly is that?”

The space girl pointed at the telescope in the yard. Was she only pretending to not know?

“It's a telescope.” I replied frankly to see her reaction.

“A tele...scope.” She grumbled some words in that helmet.

“Is it for viewing the stars?”

“That's right.”

“Hm, which one of you? The one who's interested in this?”

She pointed back and forth at me and Erio. If I answer to her, she might consider me as a friend. This is one of those landmines in life, I guess.

“Hmphf, hmphf!”

Interrogated by the space girl, the futon roll stood out bravely.

“Hmm~ You, huh... I see now.”

“Hmphf, hmphf!”

Hmm, Erio seems to be more assertive when she has that thing on. Is this what they mean by psychological suggestion? Not that I really know what it means, but her confidence was truly amazing. As I ogled from the side, something changed between the two.

“Hah... Hah... hah...” “Ugh...” Both side seemed to suffer from the heat. I wanted to cry, remembering how I was actually hanging out with them.

“Why don't you just take off that helmet.” And you the futon.

“This is how I limit my power — I cannot take this off.”

“Sounds like something Futon Erio would come up with.”

“Do not compare me with that low-tier seal!”

“Mmf!”

Erio retaliated; she pounced toward the space girl and bravely tackled her. I thought maybe with the futon in between those two it would soften the impact, but the sound it made was unexpectedly heavy.

Wham! Both of them slammed into the ground.

It would appear both felt the brunt. The futon lied there with legs flailing. “Oh no, the futon's dirty...” I helped Erio up and glanced at the space girl.

“Owowow...” She pressed down on her head, moaning; the helmet that fell off when she was hit rolled on the side. My eye caught the space girl's face...

Speechless.

The self-proclaimed esper had her face exposed.

I, too, was blinded by that brilliance.

The person packaged in that space suit was a pale girl.

A head of rumpled, white hair that seemed to burn the eyes, like sun in the telescope; a luminescent paleness that seemed more like someone had forgotten to colour the painting caught my gaze. Not just particles, but a star that emitted the very light that danced aimlessly around itself — that's what I felt.

If we're talking about with humans or Erio, she is definitely related to the

latter: an out-of-this-world beauty. The girl that emerged like Erio shouted scornfully.

“How dare you! You attacked me knowing that it would shorten your life span to this summer! Who the hell do you think I am?!”



“How dare you! You attacked me knowing that it would shorten your life span to this summer! Who the hell do you think I am?!”

Could you not play both the vice general and his friends? Protesting loudly, she grabbed her helmet and stood. Instead of sealing herself up again, she decided to have the wind cool her heated hair.

“Hmph... Fine. Since you are a fellow XXXXX, I will forgive your misconduct this time.”

Once again, as according to her back story, she pretended Erio to be an alien while excusing her for that reason. Next, her sharp eyes moved onto me.

“As for Thekousin, I will forgive you too based on your precarious future.”

“...Oi, I don't recall being related to you.”

“? Isn't your name Thekousin?”

The space girl spoke blankly in bemusement, confirming my name.

“No, my name is Makoto.”

“What!” She jumped exaggeratedly. Was it too shocking or what? Does my face look like it was made for the name 'Thekousin?’

In kanji, it'd be written as 糸子(Itoko). I wouldn't be surprised if there's a girl by that name.

“Hmmmm.” Hugging her head, the space girl shuffled left and right like she was trying to mix something.

“Strange, I thought that's what he was called... My memory is impeccable. It might be boring, but I must begin working as well... Ahh, um...” Ahem! After a few fake-coughs, she ceased speaking. I don't really care either way, but is this part of her character setting?

“I will consider you a proxy of the Earthling, then, and show you minimum respect. I will ask you just once: what is your name?”

She arrogantly demanded my name; without hesitation in her words or tone, she displayed the utmost insolence.

“I just told you a second ago.”

“Since I've asked you to, just say it. Don't you know etiquette?”

I couldn't even react to how cocky this brat is; though annoyed, I still began my meaningless introduction the second time.

“Niwa Makoto. And you are...?”

“Hoshimiya Yashiro. An authentic esper, slash alien! I have stopped here not for the sake of visiting, but business. Pleased to meet you!”

Esper, alien and traveler: the melting pot of a girl energetically shouted toward the night sky.

Of course it was somebody I didn't know. This was definitely the first time we've met.

She's supposed to be an alien, but no matter how she enunciated that name, it is undoubtedly a Japanese one. Clamoring from the local ramen shop, the wind sifting through grass and the mating call of insects.

My sigh dissipated in the symphony.

Once again, the sound resonated in the night.

I'm afraid this is where the summer of this year truly began.

The girl enigmatic from beginning till the end — this was my first time making contact with Hoshimiya Yashiro.

- 前川さんのサンドイッチ(十一応早朝草野球)。 +2
- Sパーに絡まれる。 -2
- 夜も絡まれた。 -2

現在の青春ポイント合計 +6



Chapter 3 - The Girl Under the Eave

On the night that bizarre summer began.

The stargazing had ended and that Yashiro, who somehow ended up under the Touwa's porch and refused to leave, had finally been driven out; the time was eleven o'clock.

In my room, the cellphone rung. The ringtone wasn't short, so it wasn't a text message.

I picked up the phone to check the caller ID. "Ohoh!" This had to be first phone call we've had.

Sitting on the bed, back against the wall, I prepared myself for a war of attrition and accepted the call.

The gentle voice that came was, as usual, soothing.

"Hello, is it Niwa-kun?"

"Ryuushi-san is speaking."

"I told ya to call me Ryuuko."

"Oh! Now it's definitely the real Ryuushi-san." To my knowledge there isn't a fake one though.

"I told ya to call me Ryuuko~ Say Ryuuko!"

It might end up being a vicious cycle, so let's try changing the direction of our conversation.

"What about Mifune-san?"

"..."

"You don't like it?"

"If ya wanna call me that, might as well call me Ryuushi~ But my name is

Ryuuko!”

“Got it, got it~ ...So, uh, what do you need?”

I broke the cycle. Ahem~ Ryuushi-san deliberately coughed a few times on her end, and I, too, adjusted my pose. The insects' cries from the open window appeared just a little like the ringtone.

“Mm~ Like, when ya just can't keep your eyes closed trying to sleep, y'know~ So I tried calling ya.”

“I don't see how they relate, but... Maybe you just slept too much during the day?”

“Wow, your thoughts sure are full of dream... Ah! 'I can't sleep for there is no dream'! Doesn't that sound super cool?”

“Clap, clap, clap.”

“Heheh~ Thank you, thank you... Actually, I'm a little nervous, in more ways than one.”

“Hm?”

“Like a pun, you peel me?”

“Before I correct your misuse of pun, I don't 'peel' you.”

“I just bit my tongue a little! Aww, it hurts~ I can taste the blood!”

The sound of rolling echoed. It would appear Ryuushi-san was lying on her bed as well. Ryuushi-san in her pajama...

I almost started imagining, but didn't I see her wearing one last month when she came over? Well, I guess it was Erio's pajama.

“Phew~ If a blood truck was around, nobody would be too upset.”

If you were bleeding so much, wouldn't it be better to go into the hospital instead of waiting for an ambulance to be around?

“So, what could possibly make you so nervous that your life is on the line?”

“Well~ Cuz... This is my first time calling you, Niwa-kun.”

“Hm, that's right.”

“That's enough to make me lose it!”

“I-is that right?” Now that she pointed it out, I'm feeling embarrassed too.

“Talking on the phone is, y'know, a little bit more embarrassing than the usual. Like, ya are right next to my ear and whispering to me and stuff, don't ya think?”

“Hm. Yeah, a little I guess.” I played tough, but hearing her say that, even I'm becoming conscious of it.

“Or like a hamster-sized Niwa-kun cuddling on my shoulder, heheh.”

“The fact that that sentence didn't end in a question concerns me.”

“Oh yeah, something else too.”

“Nice to see you hearing half of what I say as always.”

“My basketball club is actually having a game next week.”

“Wait, 'your' basket ball club?”

“What I mean is sometimes I feel like it's mine.”

“So you're the captain of the team, but only in your head.”

“Yep! That's exactly what I mean, Niwa-kun!”

Well, no, it was just a silly joke... Is that a normal thing for an athlete to dream about?

I guess so, since I too once yearned to become a football captain too.

“Then I'll go see you during the game.”

“Oh, but there lies the problem, missis! Ah, I mean, Niwa-kun!”

She's smacking something. Her pillow?

“Oh, just by the way, sorry about this morning. Something suddenly came up.”

“No, that's fine.” And I felt like it'd be trouble if she and Erio met anyway. “So, what is the problem?”

“Mm~” She grumbled. “Originally I was gonna practice till I was perfect so

that I could be in more games... But if I did, forget about this summer, it'll probably be after I graduate! That's why I'm nervous.”

“Hm... I still don't see what the problem is though.”

“Well, y'know, if I'm not playing in the game I told you to go, isn't that just terrible? That's why I have to be sure.”

“So that's how it is... I see.”

I had the same experience too. Despite not wanting to, I recalled the parents that came all the way to watch a game that their son never got to play in, while helping to take care of other people's kids.

“That's what's been keeping me up. That's all!”

“Okay, I get it~ I understand now.”

But there is still nothing that I could do to help.

Even if there is nothing I can do, shouldn't I still say something to comfort her?

“Then I'll pray for you. I wish Ryuushi-san could play in a game.”

“Ahaha! If I can choose, I'd rather have you cheer for me! Prayers are for the gods, but I can hear you cheers, right?”

'And I told ya to call me Ryuuko!' Even through the phone, I could sense how relaxed she was with that usual phrase.

I've become a hopeless addict to that 'I told ya~'

“If I get to play and kick butts in the game, can I expect some rewards from ya? JK, heheh~”

With assured laughters, she decorate her request for something other than spiritual support.

“A reward, huh... Is there something you want? If it's something within my ability, that is.” You're gonna have to look deep to find that bar though.

And who'd wish for something so far in the negative? That's just how it is, hahah.

“Mm~ Then~ How's going to the festival together sound? It's getting a little awkward for me to go on my own~”

“Wouldn't that be a reward for me?”

“Eh?”

I kept my voice down and mumbled, so Ryuushi-san couldn't hear me.

“Oh, it's nothing. Not that I care about conveniency, but is the festival you're talking about held in this town?”

Even with the window open like that, I've never heard any festival music come in.

“Um, the biggest one is on the thirteenth of August, I think? I remember it being held on that day every year. I use to go there with the Onee-san from around, it was so fun~”

“Oh.” If it's the thirteenth, then it'd be in three weeks.

“Ugh~? Ya were playing baseball without knowing about this, Niwa-kun?”

“Know about what?”

“The last game of the amateur baseball decides whether the city or shopping district gets to conduct the event. I don't know who made the rule either, but apparently it was to avoid conflict or something. Dad told me if the city wins, it'd harder for the shopping district to go to the festival, and vice versa.”

But the city usually wins~ Ryuushi-san casually added.

The real deal in three weeks Maekawa-san was talking about — the match that has everything to do with the festival?

Ah~ So we're just doing practice games now? But it already seems like the shopping district has a high chance of losing this year too. And if that were the case, can I still go the festival on the thirteenth?

“Oh, soz. I know we're rolling around like a square, but...”

“Hm?” I guess I'm already used to Ryuushi-speech. I didn't even bother asking.

“About cheering. Touwa-san, would she show up? ...I'm just wondering.”

“...I don't think she will. Probably.”

Hm~ Ryuushi-san is oddly concerned with Erio. If I try to point this out, things might become more complicated.

And to keep whatever atmosphere we have going, I am always mindful of staying away from that. It isn't easy, but it is what I want to do.

“I see~ Then, okay. I know it sounds bad to say things like this, uh, um, sorry. I don't really know what I'm saying any more.”

“...Ahaha.” It's the wisest to not ask any further, right?

“Oh yeah~ Speaking of baseball, I wanna talk about Nakajima-kun.”

The conversation took an L turn right then. What we just talked about wasn't going to end up anywhere sunshine and butterfly, so I tried to end it. And now we're talking something I was personally very interested about, so I said nothing.

But from how startled she was then, I'd never guessed that Ryuushi-san would be the one to bring this up.

“So what's the matter?” I curled up in preparation for any comment.

Perhaps anxious, I heard she swallow. Then...

“Nakajima-kun... I asked him out this March, only he shot me down.”

...It's one of my predictions, but not one I had betted on.

“I see... That is... A shame.”

“Eh? For me?”

“No. For Nakajima.”

This is Ryuushi-san we're talking about here! She doesn't stand out, yeah, but she's certainly someone special amongst all these people.

“Ah... Wuu... Then, if it was for Niwa-kun... Um, uh...”

“Hah? What did you say?”

“Nothing~! And I thought we were gonna have the best summer ever, but we haven't done anything yet!”

“That's because you're always so busy~ But is that really so bad?”

“Mm~ But still...”

Then we talked everything about nothing until one of us finally yawned.

We talked about Ryuushi-san running away from home, and when I met an alien (lol).

These meaningless prattling faded, like stars in the dark sky.

The next morning followed.

Under the influence of having no baseball game and talking for too long, I woke up late.

Scratching my unkempt head, I walked down the stairs; I circled the entire house once, in case Meme-san was already up. Yet, someone who I shouldn't be able to see again sat naturally in the house, making me doubt my eyes.

In the living room, Yashiro chowed away at her breakfast, mouth filled with fried egg and grilled eel.

Like a bear stuffing itself before hibernation.

And instead of the space suit, she wore a shirt and skirt that probably belonged to Meme-san. Is this kid taunting me, like 'space ship launched! Totes carefree!'

Whether it's her outfit, skin, or hair, they're of a pale colour expressible in just black and white.

Perhaps she took a shower earlier, her hair glistened with moisture. Enjoying the hotel service too, you little turd?

On the other side of the table, a smiling Meme-san sudden raised her head up from watching the voracious girl. “Good morning~ Mako-rin!”

“Who's the person even more abnormal than what you just called me?”

“Hm?” A scowling Yashiro with puffed up face turned over. The mysteriousness her almost silver hair and face exudes was reduced by sixty percent, while her friendliness increased... I would hope not. That aside.

I looked over to Meme-san to demand an explanation. She blinked crazily

with her eyes, probably because dirt got into her eyes. In some interpretation it could also be winking, but I'd like to ignore this possibility.

“Mako-kun, if you don't eat now, someone's gonna eat 'em all~”

“Is it because there is someone eating my food?”

“You shouldn't be so mean to your friends, Mako-kun. Oh and by the way I think your 'tsun' for your aunt has been going on for a little too long. Your aunt has been charging for too long, now her power's leaking!”

Are you perhaps mistaking your ageing with something else?

“She's just a sketchy kid, not my friend.”

“I found her collapsed under the porch when I was doing laundry this morning.”

“I was sleeping.”

“So I brought her in.”

“Wahahahah!”

“Ahahahahah!”

Stop laughing! Stop being so chummy! And stop bringing kids in!

Are you one of those grandmas from the old stories? You shouldn't be so kind! Looking closely, the spacesuit costume hung on the laundry pole in the yard — the source of nightmare appeared to drift in the breeze.

I saw Erio too... Swinging a broom. What's she doing?

“We don't have a baseball bat for her to practice with, so that's the best we got.”

“Oh.” Baseball practice, huh. Does she like amateur baseball that much?

In the front, Erio; in the living room Meme Oba-san and Yashiro. What a strange sensation.

I hope I never get use to it.

It is as though we are now forced into the parallel world that 'Yashiro is a part of the Touwa family.' Is it because she fit so well in here? There's a force not to

be reckoned with.

Meme-san squinted gently at Yashiro's symmetrically-split hair.

And when she almost choked, she'd hand her a cup of barely tea like a loving mother.

...Um, isn't this a bit too much? Did she give up on her gap-moe in favour of mother-saint character?

To calm myself down, I sat on the chair on the right side of the desk while glaring at Meme-san.

“So, why did you let some fishy kid into the house?” At least be cautious around something like this!

Well, maybe she's a little more trustworthy than your child from some times ago, but still.

That's not saying a whole lot if you're comparing two people in the same negative, right?

Meme-san held her breath, skipping out on oxygen supply for a bit; when her cheeks turned red, she covered her mouth and looked away.

“I-I didn't let her in because she called me a Onee-san!”

“...” My head hurts. This morning is ruined.

“Fufufu, I've hypnotized this women. This, too, is thanks to my super power.”

Yashiro cockily added another lie.

“You're just kissing her ass, aren't you?” Don't you have any self respect?

“I mean, a weird old lady was coming on to me.”

“My! What do you mean weird!” Meme-san intercepted, but made no comment when her age was mentioned.

“So I had do it. 'Good day, Onee-san!’” She squeezed out a super fake cute voice. “The entrancing voice was needed. She became my subordinate after realizing my magnanimity.”

“I could totally see that happen.”

“But Meme is a not too bad — at least better than you.”

Did she concede because of the food? Skillfully insulting me, Yashiro also complimented Meme-san. The air she gave was like an abandoned puppy wary of humans, only getting close to them because of the food.

I thought about this occasionally, but is the interaction between human and alien not too different from that of human and animals? I can't be the only one who thought that.

Not that I'm equating Yashiro to an alien or a stray dog.

Mumbling something along the line of 'it takes a smart kid to see my true nature~' Meme-san dazed off.

“If it were me, I would extend no mercy to others, unless I have a penchant for them.”

Yashiro declared decisively and shot me a glance. Was she implying that if she were to find me under the porch, she wouldn't help either?

Meme-san blinked twice, and gave her the usual smile.

“Me too. I only helped you because I like you.”

“...Really.”

Timid by her standard, Yashiro looked down.

Her shutting up must be a sign that Meme-san's kindness has gotten to her.

Erio noticed me with a gloomy face and raised her right hand exaggeratedly at me; I waved back discreetly. From the corner of my eye, I saw Yashiro grimace.

“Was it due to her growing up here...? She doesn't appear to be aware of her nature as an extraterrestrial. Looks like she won't be able to become a comrade with a pure alien such as myself.”

That commentary was quite like a certain battle-oriented race! [\[41\]](#)

“What, so you're going to stop messing with her?”

“The reason remained unknown, so I must investigate... But I find myself not wanting.”

Again, she grumbled with her incomprehensible talk of 'work.'

Meme-san opened her mouth too, as though joining the conversation while changing the channel randomly.

"It's really hot this morning. It's making me want to go into the fridge again."

"I won't open it this time." I'll even cover it with a blanket.

"Alrighty, time to make some breakfast for Mako-kun. Just give me a second."

Given up on making conversation, Meme-san left the table. I wanted to follow her too, to ask her questions where Yashiro isn't nearby, but I didn't want to leave a non-family member alone in the living room either. Yet, once I see her stuffed cheeks and content smile (that disappeared as soon as we made eye contact) I stood up and left.

Tailing Meme-san in the hallway, I queried at her long, wavy hair.

"Are you actually fine with this?"

"What's the problem? Even if it's some girl I don't know, it's just letting her sleep for the day and giving her a meal. It's not too different than you or Erio inviting friends over."

A nonchalant Meme-san kept her pace while announcing her lack of issues with Yashiro.

Setting how careless she was aside — if one of those naive girls in children's stories were to grow up to forty years old, I bet she'd be the perfect example.

Her character of never doubting anyone; her act of showing the good and bad parts of her in front of anyone. This must be why she became a 'big kid.'

"Plus I felt like I got another little sister."

"Your understanding of the word sister is rather poor." Confusing that with 'daughter.'

However.

"I can't believe how carefree you are."

Aren't I an idiot for not loosening up?

A person who lives in a town that's more like a town than where I came from has a much broader interaction with people. There's a silly, laughable part in that fact — that is, people back home actually understand the rudimentary.

In the country side, there aren't many people. When there aren't people, you become more disinclined to interact with them.

Meme-san entered the kitchen, ignoring her niece's complaints of 'no, that's too much' and dunked more rice into the bowl with a grin. It's that special smile that only appears when she reminisces.

“There is indeed a personal reason.”

“Which is?” Because she wasn't called an old lady? No way.

Suddenly bashful like a young girl, and with a voice that seem to melt together with the morning sun, Meme-san quietly spelled out the truth.

“She looks just like Elliot when he was young. Of course I'd be nice to her.”

Okay, after the costume was dried.

I had to send Yashiro home for some reason.

...Where does she live?

I get that I was going to get Erio to work anyway, but...

“Not trying to disappoint you, but my bicycle doesn't fly.”

The one that flew now sleeps with the fishes. I wonder if the original is preserved somewhere. Namu Amida Butsu. [\[42\]](#)

“Why would I expect you to accomplish such high-level act of kindness? I suppose I will allow you to find me a place of abode.”

“Place of abode?” What about your house? And then she immediately disregarded her previous sentence.

“Under the eave, that is. I must remain on this planet till my job is done.”

“Does that involve you putting it together?” [\[43\]](#)

Purposefully being incongruent, I prevented her from rambling on.

As I headed toward the shed, a sight that flashed by my eyes ceased me.

“So hot~” Seeing us off, Meme-san, who was cooked the moment she stepped out, stood in front of Yashiro who hung her head. It's a strange expression unusual for her. With the space costume under her arm, she pinched and pulled her shirt forward.

“Are you sure I can have this?”

“Okay~” Meme-san's eyes looked bleary; the forty-year-old who proposed to her air conditioner appeared to have no resistance to heat.

“I won't give it back though.”

“It's fine, just take it~ Ugh.” Her tongue's melting.

“And you won't get anything in return.”

“If I wanted something, I would have given it to someone else~”

“What are you trying saying?”

“Exactly what I just said.”

“...Then I won't use my power on you.”

“Ahahah! Thank you very much.”

Yashiro turned abruptly away from Meme-san; the corner of her eyes met my gaze.

“The hell are you looking at?!”

“Oh, oops. My bad.” I just couldn't help but eavesdrop on this rare exchange.

“The day when you see the sun in the middle of the night will be your last!”

“How would that even be the middle of the night?”

My comment was ignored. To vent her frustration and embarrassment, Yashiro stomped on the ground and paced around the entrance. Looks just like a zoo monkey.

“Anyway, where is Erio?”

“Isn't she right there?” Meme-san pointed behind me.

“Hm?” I merely turned my head. “Hm.” There she was.

She seemed to have snuck up on me.

“I tried to get the cousin's back.” [44]

“You're not being literal enough, sadly.”

Erio bafflingly tilted her head. There's no way you can ever mimic Meme-san. Better question is, what's going on with her?

Last night, she imitated the way Ryuushi-san called me too; what's gotten into her head?

At the sight of the bicycle being carried out of the shed, Yashiro humphed for some reason. Initially I thought maybe our great esper had complaints about the plebeian vehicle, but she did not open her mouth again.

Alright, Erio in the basket, and Yashiro... Behind me? Finally — despite it being a self-titled esper — the day I get another human being riding behind me aside from my own aunt. “Came...” I'm not set so that I could easily accept this kind of thing as fortunate.

Before getting on, Yashiro donned her space helmet. Of course. Why would I ever let a normal girl onto my bike? Well, below her head were an everyday shirt and skirt, so I guess I'm suppose to make do? With both of them being the helmet clan (?), her and Ryuushi-san's cuteness couldn't be any more different. In just an instant, I'd been sandwiched by two suspicious characters.

In the front a basket girl, the back a helmet girl. If this were a game of Reversi, even I would become the abnormal bicyclist.

“Careful~ Around Mako-kun!”

“Why don't you send them off yourself if you're going to warn them?”

“The rest is up to you young folks, snuffle... My youth... My dearest AC~!” The forty-year-old covered her face and retreated back into the house to heal her mental wound. I might be able to get her back here if I yell 'Meme-san is just as young,' but I'm not that great of a liar.

Checking Erio's seated properly and hearing Yashiro's jeer of 'hmpf, a disfigured Xenom*rph mimicry?' I released the bike lock and straddled onto the

seat. From the rack behind came the movement of a person jumping on.

For someone who's just tagging a ride on the way to Erio's work, she's quite an imprudent one.

Yashiro's thin arms choked my stomach, like I was some kind of tree meant to be roped. Arms sinking into my waist, it was a tasteless act of strangulation.

I even moaned from the pressure; my Youth-points also ceased their breathing. The rigid rim I felt on my back seemed to kill off the rest.

When Yashiro is around, my Youth-points get suck away.

The almost-midday sun beamed down, like a burning hat covering my bare hair. The humidity must be worse than yesterday's: instead of dryness, my skin felt a stickiness as the sun shone on it. The sign of sweat drops formed on my back.

The colour of the vegetation and sky seemed refreshing, yet the fact that the vividness blurred before my eyes depressed me.

I'm signing the marriage agreement with the AC... Ack!

As though linked with my heart, the wheels decelerated and rolled forward heavily. The beginning is the most likely time when the bike would fall over, so be careful.

The same, I suppose, could be said about Erio's return to normalcy.

And so far, there hasn't been any major setback.

“Off we go!” “O-off we roll...” Erio followed along and mumbled an old reference. [\[45\]](#)

Don't these two get along well in a way?

I think espers should just stick with each others.

“Alright, here we are... Whoa!”

Must be because both my retina and consciousness had been destroyed by the heat, I braked too late. The bicycle stopped just after the Tamura Shop. A burnt smell permeated from between the hard-stopped tires and scorching road. A hallucination? Or did I actually smell it? I don't know. This heat seemed

to even melt the differences between objects.

“What-is- this-crappy- building-without- any-eaves?”

“Is that how you judge a house? The eaves?”

With her tongue and throat rejuvenated, Yashiro scoffed at the exterior of Tamura Shop with that alien speech. 'Mmph,' perhaps upset because the store was insulted, Erio pouted glaringly; she left from the basket and walked in front of Yashiro instead of into the store.

“What, you wanna go?”

Yashiro got off the bike and prepared for battle. Erio won in terms of height, but she wasn't wearing her futon. “Wuu.”

She cowered. “Hmph.” Yashiro closed in. This image could have been interpreted as a Yashiro, with her face covered, robbing a girl in broad daylight. I looked around to see if there's anyone who could call the police or arrest her, but only hot air hung around.

Distressed, Erio ran off. She escaped behind me, using my body as a shield from Yashiro's eyes; standing still, she looked down regrettably. What a wimp.

Due to a lack of futon, she lost the stare-off — in what part of this country would this phrase make any sense?

“You-lost- because-you've-lived- complacently-on- this-planet.”

Triumphant after successfully intimidating the space-hamster, Yashiro, despite the heat, laughed loudly.

On the other hand, has Erio recovered from defeat? Head raised, her face was exposed to the sun.

Under the continuous, brilliant light, the particles still hid themselves.

“Cousin.” Aw, no more Niwa-kun? “Want to see, Obaa-chan?”

Erio gazed toward the shop's inside. Tamura Obaa-san? I haven't seen her since a week ago.

“Well...” Yashiro was still here too, and even if I'm not obligated to stay with her...

“I'll visit when I come to pick you up.”

“Okay. Obaa-chan, would be happy.”

“Really?”

It's not like she's the typical 'lonely but stubborn old people.'

Setting the physical aside, I thought she was, mentally, an independent person.

“Really. She likes the cousin.”

Erio smiled as though she was the one complimented; facing that neck-tingling smile, I could only give a half-courtesy half-bitter grin back.

“Then, I'm off to work.”

“Yep. Do your best.”

Only with her entire body did Erio pull open the deformed door.

With her disappearing inside the store, the only ones left in front of the door were me and Hoshimiya Yashiro.

If she were to stand alone on the road, the level of dreams and hope would inflate simply from the combination of the helmet and grey outfit. It would be like involuntarily watching something just a step away from reality.

Then why not just become an imaginary person, like swathing smoke?

But because we live in reality, we are normal. Well, if it's only in your head, then you're welcome to whatever.

“Where did you, uh, want to go?”

“A place to sleep.”

“Alright, well, it's hot and all, so good luck. Don't forget to stay hydrated.”

I let the wheels spin. “Hold up!” “Uwah!” Yashiro hugged me from the back; I stepped onto the ground and avoided falling to the right.

“What the hell are you doing?! That was close!”

“Abandoning your duty is a heinous crime, you bastard! Not that I follow mine...”

“I don't remember any 'duty' of helping you find a place free and illegally.”

You're just tagging along a ride for Erio, which was how you ended here. Please don't beg me to become your escort to wander around the town. It's hot, man.

Also, a place to sleep... I knew she was just a runaway who doesn't want to go home.

“Meme has ordered you, correct?”

“She only 'recommended;' she didn't ask me to help you with jack.”

That's not for a high schooler on vacation, but a real estate agency.

“And whatever happened with that guardian guy of yours?”

“Well... I don't wanna be a nuisance, so... Ugahh—“

Despite wailing in her helmet, Yashiro didn't throw any tantrum.

What she said was surprisingly Earth-y.

“Are you not Meme's son?”

“Nope.” The sudden turn in speech was unexpected, but I shook my head still.

“She's my aunt. Didn't you hear Erio call me 'cousin?'"

“Oh... Hmph.”

Yashiro hopped onto the bike rack and strangled my chest. It was like she's grabbing onto a piece of wood after falling into the sea. She seemed completely ignorant of what I'm made off, clawing at my flesh. The way she hugged me made me dubious whether she considered me as living.

“Aw— cut you damn nails!”

“I have a place I want to go. I'll tell you where.”

“...And you'll be happy if I send you there?”

“Mm, I'll... Let you off the hook.”

“Well, thank you very much for that.” Whatever, I'll play along till then.

Thanks to being a nice guy all the time, I felt the responsibility of not ditching

a girl on the street.

The bicycle with one less person forged ahead with a squeak.

Every time the wheel spin, the sound that followed was twisted like that of an insect flapping its wings.

On the road were a lack of people and car. Was it because now was a time when both working people and students would rather stay inside?

Without Erio or Yashiro, I would probably stay in my room to chill as well.

How should a summer vacation be spent? Full of events, or, as the word vacation would suggest, used only on resting?

Being busy certainly has its merits, but that kind of defeats the purpose of 'vacation.' Three days of rest, then three days of business, and finally three days of rest... Is this the ideal...?

Enough with the bullcrap.

Yashiro's route appeared familiar.

I started to see the occasional students wearing school uniforms. Were they on the way to their clubs? Or were they merely walking home? Basically, that's the sort of people I saw. As I wondered how similar the road looked, turned out it's the other side of the path I usually take to school. In other words, I watched this very same scene every day from a different road.

If we keep going ahead, we may end up around my school.

After riding for a bit more, I spoke to Yashiro, who'd loosen her grip on me.

“Hey.”

“Hnwhat?” Passing out? A lethargic response.

“Why don't you take the helmet off?”

“Do you wish for the destruction of this planet, you sicko? You are unfit to be the denizen of this planet!”

“Ahh, please keep it down, will you? Fine, let me ask you something else.”

“Mm... Ah, mm.” If you're gonna forget then just stop acting.

“Do you really believe in super power?”

The air behind me tensed; affected, I shrunk my thoughts.

“You don't believe me anyway, right? So why did you bother asking? Idiot.”

“You don't pull punches when it comes to insult, do you?”

It's like Tamura Obaa-san, but at a much younger age.

“I've already given up on trying to convince people anyway. All of you are the same: you all blindly accepted that 'it's impossible,' and you deny any strange things as the super natural. Ah, take a right here.” I turned right. Oh, I know this place. We'd reach the school's gate if we keep straight.

“You all believe that 'it can't be real if I don't think it is.' I am tired of you all.”

As disappointed in people as she sounded, she again and again emphasized to me her esper identity. Why, though? A simple hypocrite? Or was I an exception to the rule?

I wouldn't be happy even if she thought me as hopeful.

“And what does a simple belief change?”

I retorted lightly. What does believing do anyway? Without a shard of practicality, that is.

Whether it's football or baseball, I can't become the best by just having faith.

But this Miss Yashiro seemed to have some great power. She must be on a different league, right? I didn't want to jab her like so, but in the end it didn't matter.

“You simply do not know that the world doesn't not revolve from a strictly physical sense.”

“...Really now?”

“And truth to be told, I've never thought of 'believing' in my super power.”

“Wha? Are you listening to yourself?” My exaggeratedly high-pitched voice vexed me.

“If it's what I possess, then it is nothing abnormal; therefore I don't have to

question my confidence in it. Would you purposefully pray for your stomach's existence? Of course not. To me, my power is just another part of my body.”

Perhaps mused over this conversation countless times, Yashiro spoke clearly and persuasively. I didn't have the energy to debate her in this weather, so the words went in an ear and left the other.

“This is, at most, my thought. You simply cannot comprehend.”

“Okay? So why are you the only one with powers?”

“Hmph, to think that you do not believe in the possibility of it happening to just a selected few. This is why I hate you humans' typical way of thinking. Haven't you thought that maybe because you kicked a piece of rock on road ages ago, the world is like so? You might have shouldered a significant part in shaping this world.”

“...That's the thing about butterflies and wings right?”^[46]

“I meant humans are actually much greater than they thought they are. Likewise, I also disclose the possibility that anyone could be the bearer of an unnatural phenomenon.”

Now she's praising humanity? The ultimatum of super-power belief is, in the end, just a spiritual theory?

The only thing I understood from this exchange was that nothing could change Yashiro's unwavering dogma.

So far, there was no proof for her unnatural abilities.

We entered the road toward my school. Ryuushi-san might just be in the gym... “Oh! **Stop!**”

Yashiro's voice rose. What happened next ensues command; the bicycle slowed down as I realized the inconspicuous sign of disaster. I wasn't braking; the front wheel was still moving. If I separate the back end everything would have been fine, but the bike creaked as it struggled to stay up. “Whoa! Wait a —! Hold—!”

We fell.

I couldn't save it. The bicycle, as though sliding, crashed onto the concrete

floor. Out of reflex I stuck my palm out, avoiding having my leg trapped and diced by the road and the bike.

After making sure the bicycle stopped further down, I looked back. Judging from Yashiro's rubbing of her feet, as well as her stiff expression, and the sudden deceleration of only the back wheel...

She stuck the tip of her shoe into the back wheel, trying to stop it.

I pulled the bicycle, the front wheel still spinning, up and screamed at Yashiro.

“W-what the hell are you doing, you dumbass?!”

“If you too have super powers, you wouldn't need a brake to slow down.”

That's only thanks to your endurance for pain, right? Her toes must hurt a lot!

“Then do please use yours!”

You don't have to destroy the world — just use it to help someone else!

“My abilities are far too great for this—”

“Right, yeah, whatever. So what's wrong with you?”

“Do you have fruits growing out of your eyes? Look! It's a water reservoir!”

The direction Yashiro pointed intently to was... My school. Yeah, that's right. I mean, it's where we were just passing by. As of this reservoir... “Wait, that's just a swimming pool.”

“Ahahaha!”

Ignoring my words, she dashed toward the school. As though impervious to her pain, the helmeted girl latched onto the fence surround the pool and scaled it nimbly. She'd definitely be arrested if Mr. Security catches her. Her skirt also fluttered defencelessly as if screaming 'it's summer!' More than the person herself, I was embarrassed.

“Ahahahahahah!” Stimulated by something, Yashiro clamoured mindlessly while climbing up, and jumped onto the empty poolside. Perhaps the impact numbed her feet, she kneeled down after landing.

“Hey! Is this where you wanted to go?”

I yelled at Yashiro from behind the fence. Now that I thought about it, I did hear that our school doesn't have a swim club, so the pool is usually open for students during the summer. Obviously no one was here because it's not open, but in the afternoon when club activities are out, people might show up.

“Correct! The humans are only remotely capable when it comes to this stuff! A puddle filled with cold water!”

Being stealthy since she's trespassing — Yashiro, screaming energetically, had no plan on doing that as she walked toward the edge of the pool. She then raised her arms parallel to the sides, stuck her chest out, and fell flat into the water. Her stiffness might have been mistaken as a suicide if this were elsewhere.

The splash was surprisingly small; her weak existence was as though a fish bait dropped into a pond. I couldn't see from where I was standing, so I had no clue what happened to Yashiro in the water. Only, as I stood encased by the cocoon known as the sun, she was embraced by cold, pool water. I'm a little annoyed, knowing that.

Oh, she surfaced. Like teleporting in a sci-fi movie, she slowly emerged with lines waving about. She probably took the helmet off in the water, letting her face exposed directly under the sun. Again, a person who shines even in the day.

“I'm gonna go home now. Remember to leave before the students catch you.”

After that extremely basic advice, I turned away from that pool. Just what the hell did I come here for? With so many questions for what I did, I couldn't even regret anything.

Since I'm already here, should I visit the gym? As I thought so while swiping at my forehead.

Something weird made contact with me. At the instant, I even thought I was stabbed in the back. Like having a block of salt shoved into my brain, it was a weighty and upsetting sensation.

Ringin' set in, and my senses disoriented. To pull the feeling of disaster back, I tried concentrating on the heat... Agh! I pulled my hair hard; despite the

growing fatigue, I managed to calm myself down. Finally, I got a grip.

The mysterious liquid dripping from my head and back turned out to be cold water.

The pool's water, apparently, splattered on me. But, the amount was odd. Was I covered by a whole bucket of water? Was there even a bucket near the pool?

Trembling, I turned around and glared at the perpetrator. Grabbing the fence and shaking it, I protested, "I almost had a heart attack! And I mean literally!"

Yet Yashiro was still... And I want to pause here for a second: she's floating on the water, quite a distance away from me. No bucket either. Or any one who could have been her accomplice.

Super pow—? No, no way.

"Well, well. Looks like there won't be any need for super power, Makoto."

"Wha?"

"Get in here! Let your brain loose like a globe! Don't stop now!"

Yashiro raised her legs and kicked, splashing water toward the poolside. The water didn't hit me, and it dried quickly under the blazing sun.

I'm actually a student here, y'know? If they catch me, it will definitely stay on my record. A free and shameless creature like yourself is very different than me.

Aw, but dammit, it's still so hot.

And she's there splashing water.

Somewhere deep in my throat squirmed.

"Grow a bigger brain! And don't give up on what you can do, you stupid idiot!"

I did not know whether it was censure, jeering, or just raving.

Yashiro's existence in my mind distorted, like silhouette blurred in the heat.

Gripping the fence, with a deep, strained voice, I spoke.

"...Fine."

I should have been a regular high school student looking for Youth-points.

Breaking into the pool at a time like this isn't like me. Besides, I don't want to be seen with a suspicious space girl.

Yet, with the excuse that I didn't want to go around, I put my hand onto the fence.

I struggled awkwardly climbing up.

With my body acting so irrationally, the inside of my head burned.

The students running on the track seemed to look over here, but I ignored the gazes. I decided to see them as people who are across the sea, in a country far, far away.

I landed by the pool; I took off my shoes and my socks, staring at the glittering water.

It's hot; I wanted to cool down. And so, I leave the natural desire during the summer, as well as the only solution, to the sight in front of me.

The AC didn't want to marry me, so water is my only comfort!

Pushed by this senseless motivation, I dashed mindlessly.

I got as far as I could away from the poolside.

The day when Erio and I flew into the sea surged in my mind; compare to then, I might be able to enjoy the dive a little more. The sea was cold, but the pool refreshing.

I dashed, for no one else's, but my own sake. This heat in my head finally imploded.

“Yooo~! Hoooo! GOO!!”

With a speed that would definitely get me in trouble with a life guard, I jumped into the pool.

The watery world, decorated by speed, undulated like rumpled paper.

My ears could feel it, the giant splash on the top of my head. But even that was short-lived. With that same momentum, I ended on the very bottom; with more air out of my body, I sunk continuously.

I breathed out more, getting rid of that lung-searing air. Embracing me like some sort of creature, the water soothed my limbs.

Even the sunshine seemed gentle in the water. I reached out; the wavering ray, like tails formed of light, appeared palpable, but escaped my grasp annoyingly.

Off with heat and sweat, I only swam up when the pain of suffocation settled in.

Upon surfacing, Yashiro welcomed me with giddy laughs. Shirts and skirts dampened, her skin showed through; it might have been tempting to stare, but I couldn't bring myself to. Still, I did just that.



'Upon surfacing, Yashiro welcomed me with giddy laughs. Shirts and skirts dampened, her skin showed through...'

Unaware of my impure intent, Yashiro grinned satisfactorily.

"I knew you weren't hopeless."

Just spare me with that.

We frolicked.

We probably end up using twenty different special moves.

Kamehame-ha being the most common. Even an alien knows about that manga, huh.^[47]

Just for your information, no one caught us. According to Yashiro, it's because 'a barrier made of light rendered us...' (discontinued), but in reality it's simply because we're lucky, and that the students around didn't care enough.

Strange that all it took for me to cheer up was jumping into a pool of cold water. And I'm not exaggerating.

I will admit though, that it felt pretty gross when I came out from the pool with wet clothes sticking onto the skin.

Tired after swimming, Yashiro headed toward the shade under the school's storage shed; without drying her hair, she plopped down and fell asleep.

"Hey, are you sure this is fine?" Even if it's not an eave?

"Yep..."

A slow nod from her. Then, her wet shirt changed angle or something, and the scene started sparkling. I scratched my cheek reflexively. That's just how being young is — I so told myself to gloss over the heightened heart rate.

"Just... Leave me... **Thank you...**"

With what was either sleep talk or just perfunctoriness, Yashiro's conscious sunk. The water dripping still from her wet the ground. Unsure what to do with her, I decided, in the end, to respect her decision. There was not much, after all, that I can do now anyway.

“...Well, I guess there is something.” I flipped open Yashiro's space suit and used it like a blanket to cover her up. Hm, this could more or less limit the light coming off of her, so she wouldn't be discovered by people right away. I think. Plus she didn't even dry herself off, so this should be okay for keeping the cold out.

Finally I put the helmet next to her and bid a single-sided farewell to her.

Under the sun, my clothes dried instantly. Even the moisture on my skin was pulled away; while my temperature was still kept down by the pool, I aimed to head back to the Touwa household.

And on the way back, sitting outside of Tamura Shop on the bench was Erio. She had a bottle of barley tea in her hands. Legs dangling, she stared obliviously at the wall in front. The sight, as though the horror tale of 'the girl who's waiting for the bus that will never come,' seemed surreal. Erio and the colour of summer — the two seemed to mix in an odd way.

Her head tilted left in reaction to my bike's brake. The foci of her eyes gradually met mine.

“Ah. The cousin.”

“Yo. How's today?”

“No one came, so I'm... Attracting?”

“Oh? And how's that coming along?”

“I caught the cousin.”

Erio happily pointed at me. Is the simple joke a sign of her growth?”

“Did the cousin change head?”

“I'm not some bread man, how could I?”^[48]

Well it'd be nice to get a better version of my brain of face... Just kidding.

“Oops. I meant, hair.”

“Hair?” I felt a bit of moisture on my hair. “Oh. It got wet earlier.”

“Wet? Rain?”

“Nope. It's too hot, so I dove into a pool.”

“Sounds fun.”

Erio squinted enviously. Then, her mouth opened.

“I like pool, more than the sea.”

“...You want me to take you there?” That's what your eyes are saying.

“Very much.”

“In a while then.”

It'd be inconvenient to hang out with Ryuushi-san if Erio were around, and vice versa.

Knees curled, Erio rocked herself up; she took a sip from the bottle and asked.

“Want to see Obaa-chan?”

She asked me the same thing this morning. What is this, a marriage arrangement?

...Well, not like I'm doing anything later. I'll go see our tsundere grandma.

“Hm, I guess I will.”

“Mm. Let's go, cousin.”

“Yep.”

I went in from the front door. As if warning against an invader, the alarm atop the entrance rung. Inside was empty, lacking the form of that not-so-reliable person.

“Is Tamura Obaa-san inside?”

“Yep. She thinks it's too hot, so she's inside sleeping.”

“That's kinda like Meme-san.”

Hearing my honest thought, Erio smiled meaningfully.

I headed toward the residence, where the solemnly silent hallway that not even the cries of cicada could infiltrate resided.

Every time I visit, this calming air like a cave with blue walls welcomes me.

At the end of the hall that stretched, light from the window delineated a cross.

...Stiffly, I spoke to the back walking in front of me.

“Erio.”

“Mm?”

“You got a little tanned.”

The Earth rotated on, and noon was once again upon us.

●リュウシさんと初電話。	+1
●Sパー、藤和家の中へ侵略。	-2
●学校のプールに勝手に飛び込む。	+3
<hr/>	
現在の青春ポイント合計	+8



Chapter 4 - The Noisy Summer

Baseball in the morning, stargaze in the night.

In days like these, daytime was the most boring.

Erio's working at Tamura Shop. Meme-san is working, kind of. Ryuushi-san's working hard for her club. They may not all be busy, but they're all doing something.

The only free and bored soul was me.

I was the only person home when noon arrived. Since morning I lay on the bed, eyes shut, and waited for the sleep that never came; I sighed. Half-conscious, I picked up the reference book with heavy eyes. After a few pages, I would put it down and shut my eyes again. Repeating that, two hours passed.

No one was home, and since it's been so hot, my instinct overcame me. Letting what could be called the peak of civilization, the AC, run, I sealed the room up. Because of the light shooting in from outside, I closed the blinds on the window as well. Strange, considering I used the AC all the time back home.

"Ughh~" In the first three minutes, only a tepid, mouldy air came out of the machine. After a while, a cool atmosphere capable of keeping the room comfy was established. 'The appliance you want to marry the most in summer' — the title was once again unchallenged. A fan might be a far second. During the winter, the kotestu would be a tough rival.^[49]

Now, I can ignore the stickiness on my skin. Contented, I plopped back down on the bed.

What came next replaced this irksome heat.

Time: when I'm doing nothing.

"Sigh~" I covered my face with the book, lamenting on how useless I was.

I felt my Youth-points evaporate every time when I fell asleep doing nothing. I'm not in a club: during time such as summer when school isn't in session, the chance of me interacting with another person is greatly reduced.

Youth-point is a thing only nourishable with another human being. I mean, it's too late, though, to say this anyway.

Even if I wanted to go out with one of my classmates, I just couldn't find the motivation — must be because I don't know them long enough. Being a transfer student is kind of awkward, like being an outsider.

The only person left I know is Maekawa-san, but we're not so chummy that I can just ask her out on a whim. She's a girl too, and much haughtier than Ryuushi-san. Is it her hobby, or her height? Or maybe the pressure from her dad? Furthermore, she might pass out twice being outside in this sun.

Plus, I don't think she's doing nothing. She might be working too. Didn't she say she wanted a motorcycle license? Because of that Onee-chan in a yukata?

“So it's just me?” Someone with nothing to do.

Is freedom merely being unconfined for twenty-four hours? Can't believe I thought about taking a nap when I'm forced to do stupid things with the others.

I heard the faint noise of some people; but it disappeared, as though the AC had snared it away.

Trapped in this room, with nowhere else to go, were the cries of cicada and the whirling of the AC.

“...Ugah~”

Just exactly how the hell did I manage to stay in my room for the entire summer last year?

As I recalled, it felt more like I was looking into another person's private life.

I decided to head out for lunch, so I grabbed my phone and wallet. “Uwah...”

The sun cutting into the door instantly dulled my resolve. Nifuram. I tipped forward and almost fell backward. The linguistic may be vague, but do try to understand this on a metaphysical level. I almost scurried back home. ^[50]

What if AC's had legs? Then it'd be mobile and stuff. Or maybe everything should just come into my room instead! These selfish thoughts hovered in my head as I considered a way to counter this heat.

“Of course!” I just have to carry the AC! Hot damn, Mako-kun's a genius!

After the idiotic thoughts sublimed, I walked toward the bicycle. The terrifying heat seemed able to burn off even the nutrient in the head, causing thoughts to become incredibly one-dimensional. I might just judge a book by its cover and start seeking Erio's affection. This might be a complete meltdown.

Slowly dragging the bike out, I rode forward shakily. Sweat spewing from the neck, and the sun pressing down heavily, I wondered maybe I was possessed by something.

Concerned that the bike's frame might melt, I started wandering. Where should I go? I don't want to go to the station, neither do I want to explore the local cuisine.

I hate to say this, but Meme-san's food is just to my taste. “It's love! Lovey Love, together Love, beach love!” Shame about her how she speaks, really.

So that leaves one choice... “Let's go to the Tamura Shop.” And I could check on Erio too.

Though it's only been three days since I last went. Erio seems to be doing fine these days, and Tamura Obaa-san's recovered enough that she could go into the store, so even Meme-san's relaxed.

I didn't have to change route — maybe I subconsciously wanted to go there? With that in mind, I sped up slightly. Rather than staying longer in this heat, I wanted to go into that cave-like house. My brain demanded, and I agreed.

“Hm?”

As I passed between the residence, I saw a familiar face; I braked and looked back.

She appeared to have noticed too; the sun hit the slightly crooked grin.

“Yo, transfer student.”

It's Maekawa-san. With a black parasol in hand, she walked forward.

Something's off about that attire. Only, Maekawa-san's normal outfit only counts when we're talking about costumes.

She wore blue jeans and a blouse, a getup perfect for walking to a nearby store; however, both pieces seemed too small, as much of her skin showed.

“Where are you heading?”

“I wanted to grab a bite somewhere. You?”

“On my way home after an errand. Unfortunately, one of my family member stole my bike.”

With that explanation, she mumbled something about lunch. The umbrella cast a light shade on her face. I felt obligated to stay before she came to a conclusion; despite of the heat beating down on my brow, I endured in the middle of the street. Not a single car passed. Maybe people would melt if they walked on the road, I thought.

Finally, light returned to Maekawa-san's face.

“That's it. Why don't we go to my place? I'll make you lunch.”

“Eh?” Maekawa-san's house? Girl House? It's hard to deny that I didn't want to pounce at the invitation. I could feel the Youth-points. I'm going to a girl's house! And during a vacation!

Maekawa-san, on the other hand, didn't seem bothered; she pointed at the basket on my bicycle.

“So, can I get a ride in this basket?”

“...Hah?”

“If Touwa likes it so much, it must be pretty darn good.”

Hmhm, she nodded smugly. Maekawa-san, lanky as she was, clung onto the bike like a spider and stuffed her lower half into the basket. “Wow, it's tight.”

She grudgingly accepted the condition and reported to me. I don't need to hear this. And, once again, the dream of riding double drifted further and further away from me. I expected no less from this alien-protected town that only allow its girls to do this E.T style riding... Maybe the aliens are protecting

them because they like these girls?

“Well, I'm in ya hands.” Maekawa-san spun her parasol and commanded joyously. And what can I do? I scratched my burning scalp, but seeing her like that, my doubt vanished.

She's willing to spend her day-off with me: she can sit however she wants.

It's a weekday too, so Maekawa Dad must be working.

Once again I pedalled onward. Compare to Erio, Maekawa-san was comparatively lighter.

“How are you feeling?”

“Like a shipped-off cow in a cart.”

“I bet you do.”

Should I pretend I'm the young Elliot? Like, 'Here we go~! Fly~!'

Maekawa-san lives in the corner of the residential district. It's newly constructed and close to the shopping district.

“Let me out~” I held Maekawa-san's flailing arms and pulled her out of the basket. “My butt hurts.” Hands rubbing her rump, she hopped toward the entrance.

Maekawa-san checked if the slide door was locked first before reaching for her key. “Are they picking up new stocks? Oh, did I ever mention my parents run a bar?”

“It's a bit hazy but I think you did.”

We chatted while moving in; the bike was parked in front of the storage in the yard. The current weather indicated I shouldn't worry about a surprise downpour. In fact, I kind of wanted to pray for some rain to cool this town down.

Maekawa-san opened the door and went in first; I trailed behind. “Welcome~” As though following a certain rule, she greeted before leading me into the living room.

“One sec, I'm going to prepare.”

“Hm.” Prepare? Oh, lunch? Isn't it a little shameless to have her make lunch for me? Pretty hypocritical considering my stomach growled as I pondered; hence I decided to ignore that thought.

Sitting in the living room and enjoying the air conditioner — not many things could beat this.

After about two minutes passed.

Wearing a pink T-shirt and a blue camo skirt, Maekawa-san appeared with a doughnut in hand. Then she made a strange sound of 'Nom, nom nom.' before eating the doughnut.

“...?”

“Somebody said that I didn't need to get a new haircut, so I wanted to try this once.”

“???” I searched in my shallow knowledge what this is referring to... I don't get it.^[51] “Wow, you don't read manga, do you? Not very competitive, transfer student.”

“Well, I picked a few up recently.” It's helpful when I'm talking with guys too.

She finished the doughnut and disappeared quickly. Um... Was that a cosplay? From the sound of it she was playing a manga character, but I thought she graduated from that already?

Looking down, I lost my thought in the garden projected in the window. “...” Having handmade lunch by a classmate. Typically, that'd be +2, but since now I've had all three meals made by Maekawa-san, I'll throw in an extra +3 rating. Like so, I pondered about things unrelated to the garden.

Just then, two Niwa-kun's (丹羽) appeared in the garden (にわ)... As I came up with something Ryuushi-san would, that 'thing' leapt out from beneath. I jolted away from the window, almost falling back, 'Uwah!'. Actually, I only did half of both actions described, merely ducking down a little.

Having a window between us was reassuring, but I actually thought it was a mass of white snakes.

Something crawled out into the garden. As though the law of nature, the pale

object appeared.

Strange. It's so nice in here, but I'm about to pass out.

Why the hell is she here?

The oh-so-sneaky Hoshimiya Yashiro was trying to pilfer the ripened tomatoes in the Maekawas' garden. Still wearing the things Meme-san gifted, she did not forget to don the helmet. Such a shady character. After seeing her again since we parted at the school's storage, I was at ease knowing that she's fine. On the other hand, I also wondered why she's still in town.

It's a bit wasteful, but I opened the glass screen.

"Oi." You're quite sneaky for a thief, but are you a critter? Or a farm burglar?

"Eave teleportation!"

She immediately shouted the name of an almost-ability. She appeared to recognize my voice and didn't look surprised.

"Hm-hm-hm, I-already- knew-you- would— Sorry, I can't do this any more, my throat hurts."

"Could you not play pretend when you're not feeling well? And why did you break into another person's house again?! You're also a tomato thief now!"

"T-this... Is a tomahto."

"I don't care how you say it! That's it: you have to go home now!"

"What made you think I can if I'm here? Why don't you try making a rocket that can send me to Mars in a day, huh?"

...What the hell? Not to be a jerk, but she's kind of being a nuisance now; however, if she were to starve to death here, it would leave a pretty terrible décor in Maekawa-san's house.

"Alright, fine. You, stay right there."

Even I question why I do the things I do, but I just can't stand ignoring people I know. Leaving the living room, I easily arrived to the kitchen; it wasn't a particularly difficult house to navigate, after all.

"Hm? Transfer student, did hunger get to you? Couldn't you wait a bit?"

Stirring something in the frying pan, Maekawa-san looked back. With her slender figure and the apron, she left a distinct impression of 'a capable girl.' She wore it so well I almost wanted to change my impression of her.

Basically, her apron form was in my strike zone.

“Um, would you mind I take some tomatoes?” Despite my thumping heart, I requested with a straight face.

“Hm?” Maekawa-san tilted her head confusedly at my request.

“Uhh, there's a starving cat in your garden asking for some tomatoes.”

“Oh... It's okay, I guess. I thought maybe you're becoming Ryuushi or something.”

Maekawa-san handed me two tomatoes. I wanted to pay, but she just laughed it off, 'quit joking around.' Hmm, she's indeed quite a respectable lady. Too bad she's made of paper Mache.

After thanking her, I returned to the living room. “Here.” I handed the tomatoes to Yashiro. It's still a loss to the Maekawa household, but it's probably better than having them stolen.

Yashiro took her helmet off, revealing her face before accepting the red fruits. On her face was slight bemusement, like the type when you are least expecting kindness.

If she could take off that helmet more often, then people would definitely be friendlier toward her.

Oh~ But her superpower would explode, wouldn't it? I won't forget to add that (lol) after the message.

Yashiro stared intently at the tomatoes; her head bowed deeply.

“Thank you, dream.”

“How about thanking someone more specific?”

Is it really that unreal for me to be nice?

“Dung dung dung ~ dung! Danger evasion UP! Makoto's HP increased by five.”

“And none of that stupid game, please.”

Just leave me out of it! Is what I really meant.

Yashiro bit into the tomato. “Uwee~” Her cheek twitched from the sourness; she quickly finished the two tomatoes without stopping. It made me think that when her identity is revealed, her hunger increases — could that be her real power?

...Well, it is true that whatever you eat becomes nutrient. Anyone could tell you as much, but it's quite a mystery to wonder about if that common knowledge was to be erased.

Most organisms maintain life by 'ingestion.' Perhaps, to aliens of a different biology in a planet faraway, it could be seen as a form of super power.

But forget that: seeing Yashiro finish, I worried she would ask for another one. “If you're done, get out of here already!” I ordered the intruder.

Yashiro scoffed and put her helmet back on.

“I will see to the return of this favour. Remember to thank me then.”

“Oh yes, I am truly honoured.” I didn't even feel appreciated. It's rare when you don't feel rewarded helping someone.

With cheeky laughter, Yashiro left.

Perhaps instead of recovered, she had her brain melted in this heat.

Still, what's the deal with her? I've always thought she's wherever me and Erio are.

I shut the screen and ended the wasting of AC. I sat down in front of the table, anxious and expectant, waiting for Maekawa-san's handmade meal.

“Here we are.”

Holding a plate with both hands, Maekawa-san and the smell of soy sauce entered the room. Even better was the apron that hung from her still. Excited, I involuntarily sat upright.

“Was that enough for the cat?”

“Yep, it was.”

“Awesome. Alright, go ahead.” The item in the plate was stir-fired Udon.

“Ohoh~”

“I wanted to make fried rice, but I didn't have the ingredients for that.”

She put the obviously larger portion in front of me.

I was also able to get a glass of barely tea. Dried from the activity outside earlier, my throat greedily thirsted for water; I downed half the glass in one go. With the heat stolen, my innards shrunk.

They twitched with the trickling fluid. I will see this as a demand for solid food. I'm already on it~ I put my hands together and faced Maekawa-san.

“Well, I'm digging in.”

“Yep, go ahead.” She hurried me like a mom.

I picked up the chopsticks and started slurping the noodles.

“How's the taste?”

“Hmm... This rich... Whatdya call it? The cooking manga I read before called it something.”

There's a pile of cooking manga in Meme-san's room, so I borrowed some when I had time.

“Uh, just something normal is fine.”

“Oh, okay. Then in that case, it's delicious — it's amazing.”

My comment seemed to have assured Maekawa-san; she smiled. Then, she began picking up her own noodle too.

Hm... “So, there's really nothing else you called me here for, huh?”

“Yep. I guess you could call having lunch together something though, right?”

“Yeah.” Well, that's not bad either.

I still thought that my impression earlier was too mundane — Ryuushi-san would definitely be ticked off by it. She's always been flexible. I don't really know what that word means though.

“Now I get why Hanazawa-san wanted to marry into your family.”

“Cough!”

Maekawa-san spat out the udon in her mouth; with force that could shoot stuff out of her nose, she struggled. “Uh... You, doing alright?”

The moment I asked, she shot me a begrudging look.

For Maekawa-san to be shaken over something other than her height, I think I just witnessed a rare event.

...But did I even say anything that shocking?

After we're both satiated with the noodles, Maekawa-san made a proposal: “Wanna play some games? Only got some old stuff though.”

“Oh, you play video games too, Maekawa-san?”

“A lot, too, before I got this tall. At the time, I had a... Hm, nothing.”

She just left it as is. “Well, anyway, let's go.” Maekawa-san got up and shut off the AC in the living room. She's keeping a secret, but knowing that it's got nothing to do with me, I got up without questioning. Onto the second floor, we officially enter the domain of Maekawa-san's room.

“...Hmm.”

I didn't expect it to be a girly room, but there wasn't even a thing to surprise me in there.

In the room were wooden furniture of the same tone, and a few souvenir figures placed on the shelves; on her desk rested her bag and books, and not a single item related to cosplay was seen.

A plain room contradictory to the usual biology of Maekawa-san. It wasn't until I saw the sweetfish costume laying on her bed was I able to sigh in relief.

“The closet in there is the door to your wildest dream. Want to take a look?”

“No thanks.”

I had a feeling she'd make me try them. She will most likely be more aggressive than a store clerk.

“Um... Around here... There it is.”

Dusty and its colour yellowed, the gaming console Maekawa-san pulled out was indeed ancient. It must have been top-notch years ago: I remember seeing

it on TV long ago.

She laid a few cartridges, their finishing also faded, onto the carpet.

In the end, we agreed to play the racing game. I chose to play as the walking mushroom, and Maekawa-san the green dinosaur. Neither of us picked the human protagonists.^[52]

Sitting from a distance away, we stared at the TV.

When it's Maekawa-san, I become less conscious with the idea of 'being alone with another girl.'

Was it due to seeing her cosplay all the time?

We selected the track and began racing.

"...You seem like you're quick to give up, transfer student."

I failed and started last; Maekawa-san graciously took the spot of first.

"Eh? What do you mean?"

I don't really know how to play, having only tried a little at my friend's place. I chased the back of seventh place. Did she mean I should give up on trying to win the game?

"Well, you're the type that usually gives up beforehand, so I thought that that must be the case."

Since I'm in last place, the items would usually be good... Until I got a banana peel.

How fortunate.

"You think? There are things I wouldn't give up too, though."

Like Youth-points and such. As well as first place, for this game. I hit sixth place.

"For instance, you've already given up on ever hitting Hanazawa's pitches."

"Oh~ that. Yeah. Well, isn't it too much to ask, expecting an amateur to hit those throws?"

A football landed on the ground in my mind; I tried to send it flying, but end

up falling on the ground.

“It's gonna be difficult to go to the festival if we lose... You've heard, right? Whoever wins the last games gets to host the event.”

“Yeah, I heard from Ryuushi-san.”

“Don't you want to go with her or Touwa?”

“Ah... Well, Erio aside, yeah, it certainly would be nice. What about you, Maekawa-san?”

“I have to help out at the booth. And if we lose next week, I guess I will watch the firework from my yard.”

Oh, it's next week? But, we're going to lose anyway, right? Since they have an actual player there.

“I digress, but you might be surprised to hear that I could easily let go of things.”

Maekawa-san successfully led the race. Her words and rank don't match — was she mocking me? I glanced at her screen, remembering that I just have to drift through corners. What's the button again?

“I'm already through hiding my height. Not much you can do when you're already 179.9 cm tall.”

“Dontcha think you've been awfully persistent with that number?” And you sound a little rude too.

“But I did accept the fact that I'm tall.”

Maekawa-san grimaced, twisting her controller like an actual car. That would probably result in the vehicle ramming into the wall in real life.

In the virtual world, she kept first despite having a less-than-smooth path.

“To give up is to approve of your opponent, so I don't think it's all bad.”

“That's not a bad way to make friends.”

My rank rose to fifth. We reached a tunnel.

“Only, recently.”

“Recently?”

“I should be giving up, but it's getting harder.”

“Hm?”

I tried to remember the shortcut, only to fail miserably and ended up in last place; Maekawa-san, too, tried to challenge the same route and dropped down to seventh.

“I'm wondering, 'how could this be?!', y'know, transfer student?”

“Ah. Like losing your lead because you were too stubborn.”

“I guess I'm in no place to poke fun of anyone.”

“Yeah. You'll end up last if I catch up.”

So ended the first lap. With two more to go, I climbed to fifth while Maekawa-san forth.

“Are you having fun, transfer student?”

“Yeah, I am.”

I'd already gotten used to the track; my hands, too, adapted to the control.

“Good. Then, I won't give up either.”

“It's still the first lap though: you don't have to be so pessimistic.”

I saw that bitter grin again from the corner of my eyes.

“Yeah, I guess... My point is, some things are just hard to give up.”

“Oh... I'm still not sure what you're getting at though.”

It'd a zero if she was giving me a test.

“The right answer is never so easily understood. Like a modern Japanese exam.”

“Huh...”

I glossed over, ‘giving up’ on trying to understand... Oh, I see. Her assessment for my personality seemed accurate.

But I think I also wanted to ignore that because I didn't want to disturb the

atmosphere we have playing games.

We finished second lap — I took over Maekawa-san's avatar.

"So, I'm still transfer student, huh."

"Hm?"

"Oh, uh, my name, that is. I think we're near the expiration date for that name."

I successfully reached second on the last lap; Maekawa-san shifted between fourth and fifth.

The AC moaned on the side.

"I've called you that since we met. Isn't it a little weird to change now?"

"Why's that?"

"No reason. I have pride too, you know."

For a long while, the room filled with only clicks of the controllers.

The voices of human only appeared alongside the small victory poses, at the end of the games, in the form of 'yay!' or 'tch.'

Despite it being silent, it was an appeasing atmosphere.

After about an hour, as I got bored playing normally and was driving backward on the tracks, Maekawa-san suddenly opened her mouth: "Oh yeah. I got a little question."

"Hm?"

"As a sniffer, do you like Touwa or Ryuushi's smell better?"

"Gahh!"

As she prefaced, this irrelevant question jabbed deeply between my ribs.

Obviously, this was an indirect abuse from Meme-san.

Was this an act of vengeance for earlier, Maekawa-san?

The green dinosaur easily surpassed the idle mushroom.

When it was about evening, I decided to leave the Maekawa household.

“You wanna to have dinner here too?”

“No, no. That’s too much. Besides, I think my aunt’s cooking... Probably.”

The kitchen’s been too hot lately, so she’s been looking for excuses to stay away from there.

Meme-san seemed to also find ways out of the town’s annual drain cleaning. That’s on the same level as a kid running away from cram school.

She might never lose that spirit even when she hit Tamura Obaa-san’s age. In a way, maybe being able to see like a child makes her an excellent teacher.

“Alright. Then, do say hi to Meme-san and Touwa for me.”

“You should do the same for me to your parents too... That's not an issue, right?”

“Actually, I’ve been thinking about introducing you to my dad.”

“Please, anything but that.” My face will end up catching a ball.

“Ahaha, it’s just a joke. And, uh~”

Ahem! Maekawa-san coughed. What followed was rare for Maekawa-san — she looked down, almost bashful.

“Can I, invite you again sometimes? ...Kiwa-kun.”

“Only if you don’t call me that. What about Ryuushi-san or Erio?”

“Ah~ Nah... I only got two controllers, you see.”

“...? Hm, I guess, but... Hmm~?”

“Don’t think too much about that, got it? Basically, I’m just glad that someone said my food was good.”

“Oh~ I see.”

She went on about this controller thing, but I somehow accepted her explanation. This was the first time in a long while since I complimented that she could be a model. I’ll treasure this moment.

“Then, bye.”

“Hm. I will see you tomorrow.”

Let's meet again tomorrow, when you're in your fish form.

I bid farewell to Maekawa-san, who waved her hand, and stepped onto the pedals.

Since the time was right, I'll go pick Erio up too.

The sky held onto the light still, casting a golden hue across town. No longer stinging, the sun had this softness, as though making a compromise.

"Haah."

Feeling overly fulfilled, I gradually let out the excess.

Even with no comprehension of what happened, I felt satisfied.

I could call it an uneventful day: I think it wasn't spent any differently than just cosying up in my room.

Nothing in particular happened when I went to Maekawa-san's house.

But the way I spent the time there couldn't be any more interesting.

In a day where nothing happened, where nothing was added — it is amazing to think how it was a one-eighty from the regular days.

Since times long ago, human interaction has always been the manifestation of mystery.

I rung the bell twice meaninglessly — I was that excited.

Yet, it was a suspiciously normal day in a town like this.

I once again realized that If she doesn't do weird cosplays, she'd be a tall and sensible beauty.

"In any case." It was a great day. No one could say otherwise.

"Dung dung dung~ dung, Youth-points UP, 3 points!"

- 前川さんの家へお呼ばれ。+2
- 前川さんの手料理(朝昼晩制覇記念)。+3
- 気だるい午後に、前川さんとゲームで遊ぶ。+2
- 良い一日でした。+3

現在の青春ポイント合計 +18



Chapter 5 - In this summer: Basketball, Superpower, Stargazing, Festival, Baseball and Meme-san (Omitted)

Fifty kilo, that's like tying Maekawa-san on you... Um, maybe the analogy works. Well, I don't really know how much Maekawa-san weigh anyway.

Hm... Would Maekawa-san mind if someone asked her? I had a feeling she wouldn't.

"Well, ya better be ready to see the true face of Ryuuko-san tomorrow!"

True face, huh... I'm a little worried that it'd be scarier than her true ability. Maybe she just used the wrong word?

"Then I'll look forward to cheering for ya."

"Haah~"

"Was that a sigh? Or a deep breath?"

"Both. I'm, like, a million times more nervous than last time. 'Cuz it's not just any game this time!"

"Hm... Is there like a, bet or something?"

"No no no... 'Cuz someone's watching..."

"Eh? What did you say?"

"Ughh... Are ya the heroine of a shoujo manga~?!"

"Ahahah..." Lost as I was, I laughed at Ryuushi-san's hilarious response.

"Cousin~ Stargaze time~"

Spring in her steps, Erio joyously skipped into my room. In her hands was a

blue, creasy notebook. I've always thought that she appeared in the least convenient times.

Not that I could point out specifically what inconvenient means.

"Cousin~?"

Erio hopped closer. It made me want to tell her to leave like a parent to his kid 'I'm making a very important call right now, okay? Can you let me finish first?' ...But I couldn't do that.

"Niwa-kun? What's the matter? Ya are all quiet..."

"Yes, I would try my best to handle it, but..."

For the time being, I just came up with something to resolve the situation. Ryuushi-san didn't hear Erio; Erio further encroached despise me being on the phone.

"Be quiet!" Huh? Me? "Eh~? Oh wait. Attention please! Uhhh~ One sec, Imma get the dictionary." Was she trying to say, in English, 'keep talking to me!'?

Erio climbed onto my bed on her four, shortening the distance between us. I'd try to back off, but I was already leaning against the wall in the first place. Without some super power to break the wall with, I had no escape.

Actually, teleportation would have been a much better ability. I wanted to slap the brain that thought of something so pointless at such a time. Erio changed course, staring at my face.

Like an animal, assessing whether the object she found was edible or not.

"Phone call?" Yep. I nodded silently. "Who?" No, I... How do I convey that with my chin?

"Sniff, sniff." You can tell by the smell? "Something Ryuushi." Someone's an esper! "I was right."

Erio pouted as though this was a gag manga.

"Wait a minute~? Is there someone else there, Niwa-kun?" Uh oh, she noticed too.

She's got me ☆ (giving up).

“It’s, uh... The cousin I live with.”

“Touwa-san~? Hmph, hmph~!”

“Eh? What kind of reaction was that?”

“Cousin, the star...” Erio slid the notebook across my face; she sat in front me and begged with upturned eyes. “Okay, okay, I will go out with you when I’m done talking.”

“G-go out with her?!” Ryuushi-san’s pitch changed. A shocking sound followed. Did she drop her dictionary?

“No, you must be confused, Ryuushi-san!”

“Nope! Ya are too flirty, Niwa-kun! I dub thee Mr. Flirt (Flower-*さん*)!”

“That sounds like a nickname for Hanao-san(*花尾*)!”

“Grr... I hafta get my charger!”

“The phone bill is on your side, so I can’t say I’m okay with that...”

“Oh no, my phone is actually dy—” And we lost connection. Looks like her battery actually died.

“What were you talking about?”

Covering the lower half of her face with the book, Erio questioned disinterestedly. Busy with the charger, I answered without hesitation.

“We’re talking about me going to cheer for her basketball game tomorrow.”

Following that, Erio’s eyes sunk. Was it something she doesn’t like hearing? Why?

She won’t come with me, right? Ryuushi-san said so too, but that’s not my decision to make.

“Do you want to come too?” Therefore, I still asked for her opinion.

“No.” She rolled herself up in my blanket like the stuffing in a sushi; she fell off the edge and made a resounding thud.

Due to the blanket’s thinness, only minimal damage was absorbed. “Uuu...” She moaned from beneath.

“You okay?”

“...Not going.”

Ignoring my question, Erio once again emphasized her previous assertion.

“I don’t like school, anyway.”

Unlike with the futon, her words clearly reached my ears — only, that wasn't so helpful this time.

Oh. I understand her attitude now. She left a lot of resentment, and with the third-years leaving after this summer, everyone who remained at school is the same age as she.

If she returned, in her futon, she will stick out even more. I imagined with a somewhat bitter grin.

Hmm~ If I can smile at Erio’s futon form, I guess it's also game over for me.

“Want to go see some stars now?”

Just like before heading out to the train station, on our journey toward space.

With no doubt in mind, I invited Erio to the stars.

It was in no way me comforting her — It is, after all, just homework.

The blanket roll, like wrapping for a bouquet, spun to the entrance of the room.

“Now.”

Good. And leave the blanket here.

...Oh, but before then.

Tomorrow, baseball game in the morning. We’re about ten days away from the festival host-right game... I think.

So ends the memorized lines from now on.

The usual uninterested expression lacked consistency with her hand.

During a game few days ago, Hanazawa-san once grumbled, ‘baseball doesn’t feel right.’ Still, met with the ball that seemed to indicate those words as nothing but bluffs, I missed both my swings.

Apparently unwilling to go easy even with amateurs, Hanazawa-san threw a breaking ball that changed speed drastically. She's also responsible with the pitch sequences; Nakamura-san, the catcher, appeared to only catch the balls. Considering that he took care of Yashiro, he must be an overly-nice person.

Until the sixth inning, there were only two people on base; one of them was Erio somehow. By just standing there obliviously, she managed to get four balls. Despite following her example, my performance wasn't looking too well.

Yashiro was not seen today at the left field today. Nakajima stood there instead; I met his glance, and we both smiled courteously. The girls' basketball game was this afternoon. Would Nakajima go do some practice in the gym too? What should I do if he starts speaking with me?

"Ah." Hanazawa-san wound up, and soon the ball exited from her right hand. The hurriedly-swung bat swiped at the top of the ball, sending it out over the foul line.

"....." That was quite an unbelievable hit.

I had a déjà vu moment. Is it going to happen again? No, no. I have to focus on this next pitch.

Even if I hold the bat a bit closer, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was only making changes on the decimal points. Was it a more fundamental issue? What surprised me was that perhaps Erio, in spite of her appearance, may actually be very dextrous.

I adjusted my grip once more; I assumed the stance and, without looking away, faced Hanazawa-san.

Even though I've already given up. I never had the chance, anyway.

If I hit it, it's gonna fly far, isn't it~? Expectantly, I swung the bat with my all.

Beautifully, it cut through the air. The sensation felt better, so I considered it as good enough.

That marked my third strike for the day. I made a ball go toward second base though.

...Wait. I just realized I've never made it onto a single base since I started

playing.

It isn't conclusive whether indoor sports depend on the weather, but it's clear that today was an annoyingly sunny day.

This level of heat made me want to just go through the entire gym, and ride straight into the swimming pool. Affected by the thought, I subconsciously looked to where the pool was. I didn't see the shadow of an excitable white helmet. Where did she go after Maekawa-san's porch?

I parked in the lot between the gym and the kendoujou. According to Ryuushi-san, it's usually not open during school days. The place was stuffed with bikes, as though it was the ones in front of a train station. Without any roofing, the bikes warmed up gradually.

I delighted at the sight of that yellow safety helmet among countless bicycles.

Circumventing the wall, I approached and entered the gym that echoed the sounds of balls rebounding and sneakers squeaking. In the space that harboured more heat than outside, sounds that scream youth reverberated within.

Sure is nice being young~ I'm not going to become a youthful grandpa that could only dream about this. Maekawa-san would probably pass out if she took a few breaths in here.

There were two zones in the basketball court; the right side appeared to be where the away team was preparing. A bunch of unfamiliar girls lined up there, practising layup.

If there were three guys here watching, every time when a girl rushed beneath the basket, they'd be making dangerous comments like, 'X,' 'Y,' 'Y, but her boobs are Z.' Yet, being alone here... Don't I just look like some shady person?

Now, left side. Looking up, I could see the platform that the principals makes his appearance from. There were already some people sitting there not in uniforms. Audiences? Shouldn't I sit there too? Still, I wouldn't know where to sit, seeing how they are all girls.

"Hey~ Ya~! Niwa-kun!"

Following that odd yelling, the owner called to me. Adjusting the angle of my neck, I peered at the origin of the voice: Ryuushi-san, in her team uniform, waved at me. She stood at the left court, under the hoop, with a ball in her hands. She wore two pig tails, tied to the back. For sports, huh? Hm... Including the uniform, this was an instance of cuteness impossible to witness during regular class days.

I walked, while Ryuushi-san jogged; in just a moment, the distance between us disappeared. We even almost bumped our heads together. Ryuushi-san was, as always, filled with energy.

She cracked a grin, greeting me with the usual soothing smile.

“It’s been a week, hasn’t it?”

“Yeah. I’m here to see you kick some butts today.”

“Someone’s here to see me~! Oh yeah~!” She posed. A gesture mixing Saturday and Night. She stopped in just a second from the embarrassment, cupping her cheeks with hands, ‘heheheh,’ and wriggled.

“Ugh! This pressure is killin’ me!”

“You look like you’re in a fever though!” [\[53\]](#)

“No way~ It’s cuz I’m under so much pressure...” She squeezed the ball tightly with both palms. “And it’s all ‘Kablooey!’ now!”

“Oh~ If you say so.”

It’s a little scary to ask what exploded, so I just circumvented around the topic.

Ryuushi-san raised the ball above her head, and beamed a pure smile. The softness exhibited similar to the embrace of spring was unfitting in this summer air.

“Thank ya for comin’ today~ Though I’m not the one of the starters... Mm~ I’ll definitely be playing though! I’m not gonna give up today!” As if showing off her spirit, she waved the ball around.

‘Not gonna give up,’ huh? That’s quite the opposite from my summer this time.

I thought of Ryuushi-san covered in golden glitters, struggling and yelling 'Give me a hand~' Uh, in a complimenting way, of course.

"Oh, is this the rumoured boyfriend, Ryuushi?"

Then appeared a girl who almost latched entirely onto Ryuushi-san's back. She had a head of black hair, and stood about as tall as Ryuushi-san. My first impression was that she's more refined than the other girls.

"W-w-w-what? That's nawt it!"

Ryuushi-san turned in attempt to throw her off, meanwhile, uh, yelping.

"What is 'nawt-eet?'"

"Not it."

"Hahaha! You're freaking out!"

Um, I think this is no different than the usual Ryuushi-san though. "Mmm~" The girl, perhaps her best friend, openly and literally gave me the 'elevator eyes.'

"You're that transfer student right? Mm~ So Ryuushi likes them imported, huh?"

She boldly assessed me. Also, since when did I come from not only a different prefecture, but an entirely different country? Or, maybe since this is an alien's town, anyone from anywhere else is automatically 'shipped' here... And who's gonna buy that?

"This is Mikki." Ryuushi-san whispered while pointing slightly at the girl's face. Ohoh, so this is the legendary Mikki...

Where's the mouse element? Or maybe she's supposed to be M*nnie? Okay, whatever. I guess the name came from her last name: probably something like 'Miki' or 'Mikimoto.'

"Ya are mistaken, Mikki."

"Am I?" Mikki watched for my reaction with a mischievous smile. Her air reminded me of a term I saw long ago while flipping through a magazine. It was a word written cutely, and a bit dumbly — 'devilish girl.'

I'm afraid, for a usage example, that the word was used incorrectly.

"The name's all wrong! He's Ryuushi-san, and I'm Ryuuko-san!"

Uhh~ Why are you involving me? Now we sound like a twin or some kind of partners.

"Oh, relax, Ryuushi! You're old enough! High school's the season of love, the time to bloom! Having a boyfriend isn't that weird, don't you think? Plus it's better to wear it on your sleeve!"

Mikki tapped on Ryuushi-san's shoulder. "I only care about club stuff!" Ryuushi-san objected with chest sticking out.

"Bull! Even you skip practice sometimes to hang out with this transfer student!"

"W-w-what! Ya do the same too!"

"I'm just playing hooky for the sake of playing hooky!"

"Why are ya so smug?!"

What a comedic back-and-forth. But, her boyfriend, huh~?

Mikki's misunderstanding — or perhaps, light tease at Ryuushi-san, is nothing more than for fun. But it didn't bother me, or, rather, it's kinda making my heart beat. A lot. More than just a simple jolt.



Mikki's misunderstanding — or perhaps, light tease at Ryuushi-san, is nothing more than for fun. But it didn't bother me, or, rather, it's kinda making my heart beat. A lot. More than just a simple jolt.

"So what's up? Here to see Ryuushi?"

"The game~!" Ryuushi-san corrected with hands waving wildly.

"I get it now~"

Mikki ignored Ryuushi-san and nodded deeply. Hehehe, she snickered, and cupped her hands around her mouth. Then she turned around, walked forward and...

"Sensei~! Ryuushi's boyfriend is here today, so she's wondering if you could let her play~!"

"Ahhh~! I'll get that on my own! So stop it, Mikki~!"

The two shouted on their way back. Some people stared with wide eyes, while others laughed. From a bystander's view, I am envious of this type of interactions between friends.

They certainly are good friends~ I saw them off with a smile. "Don't laugh~!" Being so loud before the game, Ryuushi-san was truly invigorated.

"Boyfriend, huh..." Hmhmhm, I'm not at all shaken. My chest just feels a little tight.

I wonder how many have been on the path of 'gotten serious because of some little things, and the misunderstanding deepened and finally shattered'? I have to be cautious.

Anyway, I'll find a spot to sit first.

"Uh."

Something deplorable appeared.

A suspicious person wearing a space costume sat at the corner of the gym, hugging her knees. She was wearing the entire outfit today. As if a tiny universe had taken form, the otherworldly corruption surrounded her, forming a dark miasma.

Everyone pretended to not see. Actually, listening closely, I unexpectedly heard a few girls gossiping things like ‘gross’ ‘should we tell someone?’ ‘what about the teachers?’ ‘Is that the Touwa Erio girl?’

“...Sigh.” If the game was cancelled because of her appearance, Ryuushi-san would be disappointed. Such lame reason appeared in my head instantly, but my feet already pointed themselves toward her before any tangent reasons formed.

To avoid the eyes of the girls, I waited for them to look away before approaching Yashiro; she noticed me immediately.

‘Good-day- earthling’ she spewed out an idiotic line; I kept silent and smiled, and pulled her helmet off.

“No~!” How did she make that sound earlier?

“Unfortunately, dear customer, the policy of this gym is the same as a store or bank: no helmet.”

“It’s gonna blow!”

Pop, I took the helmet off.

Instantly the dark corner of the gym saturated with light; the air took an 180 change. Perhaps because it occurred in the corner, the clamours were contained. Besides, with the lack of guys, it wasn’t that glaring.

Still, she attracted a decent amount of stare, with what could not be denied as a striking appearance.

“Ughhh.” She felt her neck while looking resentfully at me. With her helmet off, Yashiro revealed her pale, snake-like skin unaffected by the sun.

Crisp as though it would make a refreshing sound every time they fall, the strands of her hair shone like the stars. Unable to be tanned by the sun — she could use that as one of her jokes.

“It would be your fault if this planet explodes.”

“Yes, yes, I’m the most terrible, nefarious human beings to have lived. What are you planning to do here?”

“I am just watching. While contemplating on the future of my work.”

“Work this and work that. Why don’t you just go and do it?”

Without throwing a child-like tantrum, Yashiro gave a twisted smile.

“It’s not that simple... No, maybe because it’s too simple. Should I do it, or not? I’ve tried many things to avoid it, but frankly speaking I’m a little sick of it. I’m not exactly interested in finishing the job.”

“So why not just give up?

Hearing that, Yashiro opened her eyes wide. She smirked evilly.

“Hoh~ Now that I’ve been given permission, I shouldn’t be responsible if I fail. Ah~ Now I’m safe.”

“Hah?”

“Oh, right. I saw another human with potential while observing here. And I also discovered that this activity called basketball is a lot more interesting than I imagined.”

She shifted topic in the blink of an eye. “Ok.” I replied flatly and sunk.

Because I think I realized long ago that I’d asked a bunch of needless question without any deeper motives.

“Hmph... Are you dissatisfied that I did not appear under an eave?”

“To be honest, I want to bury you under one.”

Yashrio gave a snarky and meaningful smile, tracing the basketball travelling between the floor and hands. The girl dribbling that ball ran toward here and successfully made the shot after a jump.

“...So why, exactly, did you join the baseball game?”

Erio, too. Is baseball in for those with extraterrestrial traits?

“Why do you ask?”

“No reason. I thought maybe there’s a hint about your super power in there somewhere?”

Or of why you insist on calling yourself an ‘esper.’

Yashiro stared at me coldly, but ultimately looked away.

“Because it’s work.”

“Helping out for an amateur baseball game is work?” Even with that broad a standard, you’ve not done anything remotely close to the word suggested, right?

“Fact is, it’s just a means to an end. I won’t deny that it’s probably a poor choice, however.”

Though ridding the fatigue in her body and mind, Yashiro hung her head and sighed.

At that moment. “...It happened on a starry night.” She began with an suspicious preface. “I came to this planet.”

“Wait! A more basic question: Why — uh, ‘this planet’ right? Why did you come to this planet?”

“Eh?”

“Why do you obviously seem like you’ve never considered this question?”

“...Cease your baseless accusation. I was simply taken aback from the likes of you asking a question such as this. Listen well: the reason I came here, is because it is my fate.”

“...That’s not a reason.”

“Three days soon passed after my initial landing. With the environment desolated and undeveloped, I struggled to adapt; on foot, I dragged my battered body around. Unsure what the vile crime the violent inhabitant of this planet would commit should they discover me, I avoided any contact.”

“I can’t believe you’re going to just keep yapping.”

“Due to the creed, I cannot easily utilize my power; I do not stand a chance against these savages with under such atrophied conditions. After serious consideration, I had no choice but to accept the gifts of this land.”

“Oh.”

“Despite the planet being ravaged by its malevolent inhabitants, the local

cuisine is one of the few things praise-worthy. In the plough land, there grew a round fruit used as food; thus I attempted to obtain that nutrient to recuperate.”

“Water melon theft?”

“I was intercepted, however, as the patrol of this planet finally discovered and attempted to arrest me.”

“Good work, Mr. Police!”

“The dire situation rendered me needing to unlock parts of my power: I threw mud at his face and ran.”

“You’re a little turd.”

“During the chase, another being joined the hunt — an unknown creature more ruthless and cunning than the previous: a barking quadruped.”

“Don’t you know what dogs are?”

“Despite being able to continue the battle, I feared that the planet patrol would soon catch up. So I jumped into the river; I swam, following the flow.”

“You might make a better ninja.”

“Finally I hit shore on the riverbank; while maintaining stealth from the savages, I reached the building next to the park — and the eave.”

“An eave isn’t some kind of gadget, you know.”

“It was there when I reached my limit.”

“You’re also clearly a Japanese.”

“It was no easy task, but I managed to fit half my frame into the eave and fell asleep.”

“Why not your entire body?? This is why you’re both a horror and freak show!”

“I woke up — only, two days have passed.”

“Wha?”

“I slept not under the eave, but in a bed. It would appear I had been taken in

by the male creature by the name Nakamura, who lived in that edifice meant to worship the savages' idols."

"Hmm, so it was the shrine?"

"Nakamura revered me: his friendliness indicated that he intended to seek favour from me."

"Wow~ What a terrifying man."

"Oh? Are you too? Is that masochistic way of life a trait of this planet's males? Serving me sustenance, Nakamura expressed his fond interest in the extraterrestrials."

"Nakamura-san is a good man. Did you thank him?"

"Of course I did — are you stupid? After making sure I ate the food, he proposed a trade. How lamentable."

"Don't you think trying to eat a free meal is more lamentable?"

"Are you not in a similar position?"

"Hm? Well yeah... How the hell did you know that?!"

"Nakamura claimed that, in return for the food, I must partake in an athletic competition present only in an undeveloped planet such as this. Something about not enough people. As uncivilised a deal as it was, with the condition of continuous provision, I must accept the terms, or risk survival in a world without super powers. From the stand point of ensuring my life, I determine that to be a wise judgement."

"I see. So, in other words..."

'I ran away from home, and came here after three days. Because I was starving, on a starlit night I decided to burglarize a farm to steal some watermelons. After failing and being chased by a stray dog, thanks to Nakamura-san, I managed to survive. Nakamura-san was a nice guy, who not only gave me food, but promised to provide lunch if I join the baseball game; thus, I gladly accepted.'

"In the form of a dissertation, that's what happened, right?"

“You idiotic fool!”

Yashiro began attacking me with her right hand; though the fist landed on my shoulder, it didn't even sting. Part of the reason must be because the costume was thick enough to cover her hands, but her right arm must be extremely weak. Even with her power I doubt she can lift a bag of rice.

“How dare you disgrace my story with such trite discussion: this is in itself a form of talent!”

It was mere description of the events that happened — nothing to do with super powers.

“Anyway, who is this potential human you're talking about?”

“That one.” The person Yashiro pointed at — “Hey! Who's that~! Ryuuko-san's jaw is dropping from how flirty you are, Niwa-kun!” was bouncing around with a ball. Crap — I was found! With no other choice, I waved at her with a smile and yelled, ‘I'm cheering for ya~!’

“Hmpf~!” Which only worsened her attitude.

“So you know her, Makoto.”

“She's my friend... But, what, you're saying she's also an esper?”

Well, whatever; in some way she indeed is. For example, her ability to accelerate my heartbeat. Also, the power to make me smile like a creep. I guess rather than calling it super power, maybe a lot of girls are just magicians.

And that would make that forty-years old a witch. The spells she cast on me aren't so innocuous though.

“She's not bad. I've watched for days now; she holds high potential for evolution: she's one of the few who can go the last few centimetres.”

“Huh... What are you even saying?”

Again with the superpower theory monologue? I prepared to block my ears. Yet, Yashiro asked a relevant question instead of droning on: “Do you know the rules of this game?”

“Uh, only a bit. Not exactly knowledgeable.” From sheer suddenness, I

stuttered.

I'm not at all familiar with basketball, but I know stuff like centre or point guard. The other three positions I simply don't remember. It's common with people who don't play, but that's the level of knowledge I have.

Speaking of which, what position does Ryuushi-san play? She had a pretty good aim when she threw that empty can into the trash can.

So... Shooting star? No, that's off. It's close but I know that's not right.

"Oh? Transfer student."

A couple entered from the left entrance of the gym. The guy spoke with an amicable voice; I raised my head.

At the same time, the beam shooting in from the second floor window also pierced my eyes, making me squint.

Moving in that brilliant ray was Nakajima-san and Hanazawa-san. The two young members from the city team. Both of them wore uniform and each carried a bag over their shoulders. Perhaps they're on their way home after club, but why are they...?

"The girl there... Uh, judging for the getup... I'm guessing she's from the game...?" Nakajima expressed exaggeratedly his surprise, as though he'd just seen an alien, and pointed at Yashiro.

"Hmph."

Yashiro scoffed dismissively, grumbling, 'here comes unpromising one.' If there's one merit to her, it's that even when insulting, she never let the other party know. More than anger, it rouses confusion.

"Whoa~ She's freaking cute! This is bad, man. For you too, transfer student~" As though cheering, Nakajima continued with the 'this is bad.' He's like a grade schooler making fun of someone else.

Hanazawa-san smacked Nakajima's back. "Ow~" Even with an eye squinting painfully, Nakajima kept his smile. "Hi." With him out of the way, Hanazawa-san greeted me briefly. I replied with a 'hm.' Not copying Erio, but it's actually quite a useful reply to use. Even if you're not thinking anything, it can be used as a

response.

For some odd reason, they sat down next to me. Hmmm... The air dampened. Was my heart actually feeling gravity beyond what is normal?

The two seemed to be using me as a wall to avoid contact with Yashiro; neither did Yashiro even so much as glanced at them.

“Here to watch the game?”

“Hm? Aw, there was a game this morning, and we’re gonna have lunch out. We’re not doing anything now anyway... Soo, I guess you can call this a game-date?”

“Yep~ I’m with ‘im...” Perhaps too lazy to even talk, Hanazawa-san added languidly. From her closing her mouth before finishing, her sentence ended ambiguously.

“A date?”

“Uh, we are, well, dating.”

Bashfully, Nakajima answered what seemed like a notice of marriage. “Yep~” Hanazawa-san raised her hand without changing her expression.

“What!” Nakajima’s with Hanazawa, what has come to this world?

When did they start dating? I desperately looked for Isono, wondering if he’s crying in the dark somewhere.

In any case, I see that Nakajima is more of a Hanazawa-san fan than a Ryuushi-san fan... What poor taste. I can’t be the only one who thinks that, right?

Preparing on the court, Ryuushi-san dribbled the ball while mouthing a slapping sound. “She looks hyped, but that was just two dribble.” Nakajima pointed out; Hanazawa-san rested her head on his shoulder, her eyes drooping as if tired.

Ryuushi-san darted back and forth on the court; she ran, but the ball was never with her. She ran, with disregard to where the ball was. “Hey, Mifune looks out of breath.” Shocked, Nakajima reported to me. I can see that, you know. “She’s really in it, man. Is it because you’re here?”

“Uh, I guess.” Judging from what’s happened so far. But her stamina’s running out.

“As expected, she has potential.”

Strangely satisfied, Yashrio stared at Ryuushi-san. How does she judge someone? I’m not interested, just curious. As hypocritical as I am, that’s how I see Yashiro.

Nakajima shot me a side glance; with a moment of hesitation on his face, he began. It was a meek voice unsuitable of his sunny look.

“You know, back in first year, Mifune actually asked me—”

“Oh, I heard already.”

“I see... Hm~ So, you like Mifune?”

“I think she’s cute.”

“That’s not saying much... Are you that, uh, Touwa Erio’s someone?”

“Did Hanazawa-san tell you anything?”

“No, not at all. We would never talk about Touwa Erio anyway, you know?”

Then don’t talk about her with me either! I shot him a look with that thought. Whether he comprehended is beyond me, but he didn’t inquire any further.

It’s hot. Said one of us. True that. The other three assented silently.

“She’s gotten cuter. Mifune, I mean.” Nakajima tossed a weird topic over.

“Dude, your girlfriend is right there.”

“It’s fine, she’s sleeping.”

“I’m not.” Hanazawa-san pinched his elbow.

“Owowowowow.”

Despite the joke, Nakajima’s pain was real.

Damn this guy. I want to be pinched too~! ...I’m just joking.

Practice ended; both team put the balls back and gathered around their coaches. Running ahead, Ryuushi-san peeked at me. Noticing the person next to

me, the smile momentarily faded; then she looked to Nakajima, then Hanazawa-san leaning on him. She looked shaken. Yet, Ryuushi-san focused back on me and beamed again. She then gave a victory pose before regrouping with her teammates. “Looking good, Ryuushi-san~!” The compliment that was used some time ago once again exited my mouth.

“Did you just notice? How parochial of you.”

Yashiro commented on my soliloquy. She sounded as if she noticed a manga artist’s potential before his work exploded in popularity.

“And you seem to have a high opinion of her.”

“Hmhm~” She did not answer clearly, instead laughing haughtily and suspiciously. I reminded myself that I would be careful not to put Ryuushi-san onto the path of an esper.

“However, only if she is with you.”

“Hm? What?”

“You will see soon enough.”

With those cryptic words, Yashiro ended with that cliffhanger.

I felt it wasn’t something needing to be clarified, so I desisted as well.

Losing focus from the summer heat, I waited a few minutes quietly. The pre-game pep talk appeared to be over as players scattered on the court.

As the backup, Ryuushi-san sat on the gym floor, hugging her knees with a frustrated expression.

And Mikki was one of the starters, huh? An iconic character is always guaranteed to get the main role, as well as dividing into five people on the stage simultaneously. Ignore those dangerous words for now. From then on, a rift formed between Mikki and Ryuushi-san’s friendship... There was no sign of that.

Like so, without Ryuushi-san on the court, the game begun... Nothing in particular needs to be noted. I’m not a big fan of basketball anyway.

I came to see Ryuushi-san. And that Ryuushi-san was like a starved dog on a leash. “Grrr~” Her clenched fists trembled on her knees.

Yashiro looked uninspired as well. Did she only have eyes for Ryuushi-san in this entire club?

Both team had little differences in score, and the game continued in that manner. If that team was tying with a bad team, they must be just as terrible, huh. Oh, Mikki just got a foul.

“Is Mifune gonna play?”

Nakajima asked, a trace of smile on his face. He’s actually enjoying the game.

“What’s the point? For a game like this.”

Hanazawa-san mumbled. Was her sleepiness chased away by the noise of the game and the cheering? She had a bitter look. Whether it’s about this game or not, her words were obviously poignant.

“What do you mean ‘what’s the point?’” Over Nakajima, I questioned.

“It’s the same for the softball club.”

Hanazawa-san spilled her inner thought.

“I always tried my best during games. But we never win. Our team just can’t win one more points than the other. We’re never far off, so I try even harder, only to lose again. It’s frustrating, but I have no one but me to blame.”

“.....”

Was it the listlessness, or the heat? Either way, Hanazawa-san blew her steam.

She once said club activity was too much work. Is this what she was referring to? It is only natural to have so much expectation placed on you if you’re too good.

“Hahahah, she’s just a lil tired.” Nakajima stroked Hanazawa-san’s hair, assuaging her. Certainly is nice to have someone comfort you right away. Only if there’s someone for Meme-san as well.

“Hmpf.” Behind me, Yashiro scoffed from her nose. Apparently she wasn’t too thrilled with Hanazawa-san’s comment.

...Does she, perhaps, dislike people who gave up?

“She’s not playing right away? These people lack insight.”

Disappointingly, Yashiro criticized the coach.

“What part of Ryuushi-san do you like so much?” It’d be apparent if you’re a guy though.

“Because she is someone who is capable of moving forward, even if it’s unobvious.”

“And what does that mean? You’re not dragging her into anything weird, by the way.”

“Anything weird...? True, for a stubborn person like yourself, it is probably considered weird.”

“Thanks for the nice words.”

“Listen up.” With that as the lead, she circled in front of me.

Directly facing me, she seemed to impart something critical.

Her fascinating appearance closed to my face, driving both my eyes and mind anxious.

Yashiro ignored the game, letting loose her words in the gym.

“People, no matter who, are capable of awakening their power, as long as they keep moving forward.”

As though condensing her philosophies into this one sentence, she solemnly declared.

Within those words were some elements that somehow infused into my body; I felt as though cold water had poured down my back. I remembered few days ago, that moment when an unbelievable amount of pool water drenched me.

Within the gym engrossed by this cotton-candy-like heat, a single person shivered at this fleeting chill.

Yashiro sat back next to me, and pointed her straightened arm forward.

“Those who believed and understood their latent power in their normal lives will eventually bloom into those with superpower. It is physically unreachable,

beyond your furthest reach, by a few centimetres. That power, never connected to you directly, is what you consider as abnormal phenomenon. Yet...”

She paused, tutting. Then, as though giving me a look, she glanced sideways at me before continuing.

“Once you come into contact with it, it will spread and ripple outward. People on my planet were more capable with it — the power held within this vessel is the proof of it.”

“...But, still...”

“For instance, in a sports competition, there are many of those who suddenly exploded in their abilities, right? That, would be the proof of them reaching that essence of power about five centimetres away from themselves. People with faster speed than others, who also reached their pinnacle of power — this is the true form of what is commonly referred to as the people with potential.”

Yashiro’s claim had no uncertainty; it is assertive, and meant to repel all. She kept talking.

“Most earthlings will never fill those few centimetres, even in their entire lifetime.”

Her shoulder’s shrugged. ‘And that’s why you troglodytes are...’ she added a few more insults before resuming.

“No matter who, as long as they can get close — to this distance as short as cold air coming out of a fridge — as long as they’re fortunate enough, the so-called ‘geniuses’ will never cease to exist. Such amazing power, yet almost no one here could reach it. People who have given up on these few, yet distant centimetres, are one of the reasons as to why this is so.”

“.....” I shot Hanazawa-san a look. Using Nakajima’s laps as her pillow, she laid down.

“Oi, Makoto. Who’s the backup, that person with potential?”

“Ryuushi-san.” I told her what sounded like a typical lie.

“That Ryuushi is slow: about half as fast as everyone else. She could spend a whole day, and no one would notice her move. Yet she hasn’t given up: it is not

an easy task to push onward, not knowing what awaits at the end. That's why she holds the possibility of unlocking her powers."

"...That's quite a compliment to say."

"It is merely a proper assessment."

And then, Yashiro looked over at me with a rare, but warming smile.

"You're surrounded by many who have the potential to wield their power, Makoto."

"Oh, please." I waved my hand in front of my face, as well as shook my head; sweat drops flew from my hair.

I could comprehend her explanation, and I also agree with parts of it. But those aren't convincing.

As for why, it would be because nothing tangible has appeared.

"Show me your power. That way, everything you said will be proven as true."

Without proofs, she's just another person here — a nutjob.

"Mm." Yashiro did not rebuke violently, only displaying a pondering face. She then raised her head: "All right. If I feel like it, I will show you in the next week or two. You will do well to pray for it."

Is this something on the same level as 'deciding the grocery day'?

"Besides, even without me, you have a chance to witness it in this game."

At first, Yashiro's prediction sounded like reckless bravery, like she just said things without thinking with her head.

As I began to retort, I noticed someone staring; I turned to my right.

Nakajima gaped at my face. Looks like he listened in on our conversation.

"Man, whatever you guys were saying was too deep, I couldn't follow."

Farewell~ He jokingly waved us goodbye. I palmed my forehead and sighed.

"Don't wave me off too."

Was all I could say.

Alright.

Let's skip all description of the game until Ryuushi-san's debut.

“.....”

The game ended. Just messing with you. The second half was almost ending, however. Score-wise, the opponent had 39 points, while us 35. I don't know if whether this is considered good or bad.

“I'm surprised with how many points both team got, seeing how their aiming was always off.”

‘Interesting~’ Nakajima remarked. ‘Is it because both sides suck at defence?’ he again added. He's actually watching the game rather intently. I'm not saying it's anything praise-worthy though.

When the last quarter began, my eyes focused onto the shape that walked out.

“Whoa~!” I stuck my body out.

“So she's finally up?” Yashiro expressed her satisfaction.

Out of the five people that walked out, Mifune Ryuushi-san was the last.

“At last, huh? It's gonna be hard for her to do much, though.”

Nakajima grimaced, calmly assessing Ryuushi-san's situation.

“You know, it's Mifune's first time playing.”

“Ah.” It's going to a wall to scale. Even from here I could see her stiffness, like her flesh had been displaced by stone; her legs, too, quivered, like a new-born fawn.

Rather than describing her as serious, it's more fitting to say ‘whatever space between her fluffiness has been filled with tension.’

Mikki tapped Ryuushi-san's shoulders, trying to appease her nerve. Seems like Mikki will be having a sequel. Despite her nod, Ryuushi-san hooked her eyes on the floor without moving.

“‘She's being overly conscious. It might have been better if I wasn't here’ — that's what's you're thinking, right?” Yashiro mimicked my voice, taunting a

provocation.

She's right. I could say nothing back.

Soon after the quarter began, Ryuushi-san got the ball; she frantically bounced the ball, but perhaps with too much strength, it returned much faster than anticipated. Unable to catch the ball, it hit her jaw. What followed was not cheers, but laughter.

"Oh god." Nakajima covered his eyes. I wanted to do that too, but I'm here to see Ryuushi-san. Whether this was what she wanted me to see is another matter.

Getting back up, Ryuushi-san did not even have time to be embarrassed; she simply chased the ball, without any apparent reaction. She's so serious, she couldn't even laugh it off.

...If it was me from before, would I also end up like this if I managed to get into a game?

Almost as if I was watching that 'if,' I lost my collectiveness.

Ryuushi-san continued to make mistakes: she attempted a steal, only to hit the hand and fouled; she charged head first, only to trip in front of the hoop and almost kicking an opponent in the face.

It's unwatchable.

I don't know if the coach or advisor of the club sent her in because of Mikki's words, but at this rate it wouldn't be strange if she was taken off court.

...And so.

When she accrued three fouls, somehow the other side made a foul under the hoop.

Although no matter how I looked, it's Ryuushi-san, who was attempting a shot, bumping into the other person, the referee called it so. There were no complaints, and despite the other team looking unhappy, they were neither hostile or upset since they probably thought Ryuushi-san was just a joke.

Here come the free throws. Yet, Ryuushi-san was wavered, her eyes swaying about.

There was no way for her to make that shot like she did with the juice can.

At that moment, as though she'd been waiting for that exact second, Yashiro grabbed my shirt and tugged.

"Wha? Me?"

I didn't know what to do when I'm suddenly handed the hot potato.

"Dumbass." Yashiro grinned.

"Be it a cliché line or whatever, use your power on Ryuushi."

"What are you saying??"

"Shout with your voice! Squeeze your throat and tighten your guts. Are you just here to sit and watch? Are you an idiot? If you came all the way here, you must be here to do something! Step up! Move forward! You're also a slow, but steady person on your way to power, are you not?!"

Yashiro jeeringly chucked her frustration at me. The responsibility to showing off power was suddenly on me.

I almost wanted to ask her 'what about your power?!' But asking me to do something... What could I, a non-player, do at this point?

"....."

I did have an idea. But I needed some courage. For a moment, I hesitated.

But.

"Moving forward with your own will, and pushing others with it — Is that not the very first power bestowed upon humans?"

I hate to admit it, but those were the words that tipped me forward.

I stood up. In this corner of the gym, no one would notice — which is why, what entailed will captivate everyone.

I will split asunder this silent gym.

The me who had already given up will never stand on a football field again.

Yet Ryuushi-san, who had not given up, should stay there.

The value of super natural phenomenon lies in that it is able to maintain

dreams, filling them with endless possibilities.

I scratched my head; after sucking in and holding the breath, I turned to face the court.

Putting my hands around my mouth, I shouted as to drain all air inside my lungs: “You can do it! Ryuushi-san!!”

All eyes instantly fell upon me; the gazes transformed into terror.

Thinking carefully, I’ve never lived as a conspicuous child, much like everyone else.

However.

Even so.

I could agree that, once I get it going, it isn’t so bad every once in a while.

If I make up my mind, I could ‘give up’ this spot of being inconsequential.

Even more so, it’s not enough.

I once again drew in more air, firmly filling my body:

“You can do it! Even though I know it’s hard! I couldn’t do it! And no one cheered for me! I could only look down, and wonder why anyone else could cheer for the guys playing! To be honest I still don’t get how! But who cares?! Who cares about looking down or cheering?! If you got time for that, why not go practice?! You just gotta work hard! I didn’t like it all that much anyway! But I still can’t forget about it! So I’m rooting for you, Ryuushi-san! If you work hard, you won’t have to give up on many things! I want you to work so hard, that others feel bad for it! So work hard! I’m never saying things like don’t force yourself too much!!”

The things supposedly coming out of my mouth did not reach my brain.

I was probably just venting some broken, baffling thoughts.

My temperature rose, and senses melted.

Just how feverish of a cheer did I accomplish in a practice game?

Perhaps making too much sound, I lost my breath and choked. Even my ears drums were dimmed, unable to calm down. Aside from the weather, my skin

heated up from another element.

I looked down and scratched my cheek, enduring the embarrassment without sitting down.

Finally, the temporary stare dissolved and reactions followed.

“That was badass~” Nakajima mumbled. “Comedy girl and loyal guy...” On his laps, Hanazawa-san exhaled.

As for Ryuushi-san.

She laughed. Like she had completely forgotten about me, she focused on me, cracking up. She also mouthed many times, ‘I told ya I’m Ryuushi.’



She laughed. Like she had completely forgotten about me, she focused on me, cracking up. She also mouthed many times, ‘I told ya I’m Ryuushi.’

Just like so.

We saved each other.

“Hoh~ oh!” Following that odd yell, she gathered herself and repositioned the ball.

Ryuushi-san then nonchalantly made two shots.

“Ah, wasn’t her favourite character Mitchi?”^[54]

The rigidness left her motion; her graceful steps carried her.

Seeing that, I sat back down and coughed a few more times.

Yashiro and I traded looks; we laughed cathartically.

“That wasn’t too bad.”

“Don’t you mean, it felt great?”

It did.

“Now, let us interview Mifune Ryuuko-san, on her first-game-slash-first-victory!”

“.....”

“Hint, hint.”

“Ah? Me? Uh, how do you feel right now, Ryuushi-san?”

“I said I’m Ryuuko!”

“What a great interview.”

“Hold it right there!”

After the game, Ryuushi-san bounced around angrily in that tranquillized gym.

Regardless of the intense game, Ryuushi-san still seem filled with vigour.

She stayed in the court for the remainder of the game, keeping up with both defence and offence. In the end, though, I still don’t know what position she played.

Without the opposing team, people dispersed from the gym; it could be just me, but the heat seemed to have dissipated as well.

“You were badass, Ryuushi-san~”

“You too, Niwa-kun.”

“Huh? ...Aw, that?”

“Like, how do I put it... It was soo embarrassing that it ended up calming me down, y’know?”

For some reason she expressed that with her fingers fanning out. So, her nervousness exploded?

Than the yelling was worth it. The awkwardness consumed me though.

“Oh, hey, um~” Ryuushi-san put both hands behind her and wriggled her body.

“Could ya, wait for me till we’re done?”

“Hm. Of course.”

“Then, wanna go home together?”

“Don’t you think it’s a little sad to just head straight home?”

“Then, let’s go somewhere!”

“Yeah, let’s go somewhere!”

“Woo~! Yay!” Ryuushi-san raised her hand, and spun as though dancing.

“Ya heard him, Mikki! I’m ditching ya!”

“I never asked for you anyway~ Not going to waste my energy with you today, Ryuushi!”

Ryuushi-san skipped to where her team was waiting.

I stayed, savouring the taste of this strange situation while seeing her off.

There wasn’t anyone else left. Nakajima and Hanazawa left right away, and Yashiro disappeared from the gym. Did she leave to look for another eave?

Arriving at the back of the gym, I leaned my head onto the wall, staring

obliviously into the track field. Are the people running there part of the track team? I couldn't help but follow the guy sprinting the fastest.

Veiled partly by the cloud, the sun finally appeared; the new light flashed by my eyes, squeezing drops of tears out of my eyes. "Dammit~" It's like my eyes were squashed from deep within. Perhaps I was too focused at the game, or more precisely at Ryuushi-san, so my eyes were worn out?

"Phew... That was too much youth." You can OD on this stuff: that was one of the symptoms.

My visions were blear, as though in a dream. The ground, the shoe lockers and even the blue skies were blended together.

It was a formless sight impossible to reproduce, yet here I was thinking I've seen it before.

The canvas recalled a memory, of something that does not exist in reality — a 'dream.'

"Oh yeah."

That dream from last night, before that scribbled chapter title.

With this sight as the fuse, it resurfaced on the inside of my eyelids.

"Uh..."

If I remember correctly—

●体育館で青春した!(ということにする)

+3

現在の青春ポイント合計

+21



Chapter 6 - 0.00000000198cm Per Second

If, hypothetically, there exists telepathy.

If that is true, then we can know what each other want. No matter how you see it, that should be a good thing.

...Well, it is just hypothetically speaking: humans don't have any powers in the first place.

Hence the phrase 'super power,' to differentiate from 'talents.'

Let's ignored what I just said — something else is far more troubling.

'The ability to read mind' — what if it's applied to oneself?

We are aware of what we want, be it tangible or otherwise: everything is exposed and completely grasped. Yet, if we wish for it all to come true, it isn't possible. How could it, anyway?

Even if I were to know all questions before hand, scoring a hundred percent on a test isn't that simple.

At least for me, I don't have that ability to fill out all the spaces in that given amount of time.

Things that must be given up piled up like a hill — no, — like a mountain.

So much so that I bet I can make it into a tourism spot if I named it.

Therefore, at the time, leaving the youth football team wasn't a difficult choice, but a natural course of action.

I still think so, to this day. Even in the future, I will not regret it. My parents said nothing as well.

The money (which came from two-years' worth of my allowance) spent on uniforms and cleats were wasted, but otherwise my life went on unchanged.

Emotions like a sense of inferiority, or frustration shrunk, flattening entirely.

I didn't have to head to the field under that bridge with my parents on the weekends any more, so suddenly I'm met with free times. Too much free time. So I started playing games for entire days. It's fun in its own way, I guess.

Knowing there is another way to spend time besides playing football, I rejoiced.

What remained was the 'barrier.'

Me and my friends didn't play football after school any more. Subconscious avoidance, as well as me telling them 'I'm just done with it' with shrugged shoulders worked like water and oil: close but never together.

And perhaps because of that, I became withdrawn. My skin turned pale, and I stopped getting hurt. Probably due to lose exercise, I ate less too and lost weight. The environment changed, like chameleons from their emotions. The initial bizarre feeling from the changes faded, eventually disappearing.

After since, I started to use 'giving up' as a way to move on.

In other words, I took the path of least resistance.

...Yet.

Just as I lived with such a way, for some reason, during the summer this year, this strange thing showed up.

A crazy, gibberish-spouting and self-talking girl in space suit: Hoshimiya Yashiro.

She said I have 'potential.'

Another way to put it is someone close to obtaining super power.

From where on me has she determined that quality?

What Yashiro professed as a forward motion invisible to the eyes, impossible to discern.

I could not catch up to even a speed like that.

"So, the real game is tomorrow. It's gonna be the big one."

“Yeah?”

“Are you joining us, transfer student?”

Maekawa-san spoke tauntingly; a tiny needle stabbed into my left ear.

“I’m not doing a thing, as usual... But, is there a point to it?”

“And what do you mean by that?”

“Uh, I mean we’ve lost every game so far. I just don’t think we have a chance.”

“Well, frankly speaking we’ve only been practising so far. I predict that Hanazawa will leave halfway through the game~”

‘She doesn’t look too thrilled~’ So that’s the extent of Maekawa-san’s accuracy.

August 8th, evening. The official game was tomorrow, the day when the city side and shopping district will compete for victory.

If it rains, no game. Refer to the Tamura Shop if you want snacks, and the minimum spending is 300 yen! Dang, I’m quite the merchant!

Since the imagination was in the voice of Tamura Obaa-san instead of Meme-san, I scared myself a little. Well, maybe she’s the hardworking type when she was young.

Perhaps because of the rain this morning, cool air pervaded the afternoon despite the cleared sky. The night, too, was chilly when we came to the yard. It might have been due to the dampened grass under our feet. Even the cicadas were reticent tonight.

“I mean, it’s just a festival. Why does it matter where it’s held?”

“For those grown ups it matters in all sorts of way. So... That’s a yes for you?”

“Hm... Yes.”

“And Touwa?”

Erio delighted at the cloudless sky, happily observing Pluto next to me. But at the moment, she seemed to be piqued by the phone, occasionally shooting me a glance.

Just like that — like playing a game of Stoplight, she would peek at me, only to look away quickly when we make eye contact. I grabbed her by the back of her collar, ‘Uwah.’ ‘Erio, you wanna play baseball tomorrow?’ and asked. Unlike with basketball, she moved her chin downward.

“She’s coming.” I let go; her stiffened back instantly collapsed as she scurried away. She then jumped back to the telescope like she was going to bite it, once again watching the sky from below.

“Alright. I suppose I will have to get in the proper attire tomorrow!”

“Are you going to wear your secret giant squid outfit?”

“There’s gonna be a fantastic ‘surprise!’”

“We’re not going to a hobby group, you know.”

We both laughed, and finally hung up. I put the phone back into my pocket and sat closer to Erio. Her hair waved left and right, while she enthusiastically sketched on the notebook. Looks like this will continue till the end of the summer break.

“Cousin, are you done with phone?”

“Hm.” I acknowledged.

“Then, watch the stars.” She emptied up the spot to the telescope for me.

Well, since I’m already here, I might as well do some stargazing... Whoa~ I was slightly awed. Even a casual glance could reveal that the scenery is different every day. Pluto moves fast, apparently.

If the changes that occur every day is as obvious as this, then living must be much more motivating and fulfilling.

According to Yashiro, people would spend decades to move just a few centimetres.

Normally, we would cower at that.

“Hey.” I walk over to the opposite side, asking a question to a smiling Erio.

“Mm?”

“Why do you play baseball with us?”

Erio jolted; she shut her lips into a line. Perhaps realizing that she couldn't talk this way, she frantically opened the seal again: "It's... It's a secret." She pursed her lips again.

"...Well, whatever."

Ending the conversation, I looked up at Pluto again.

Is Nakajima, Hanazawa-san and Hoshimiya Yashiro coming as well?

The impending day of battle.

Rather than worrying about that, I was more concerned with the fact that the summer is halfway over.

"Chang~ chang~ Kachang~ Chang~"

"Chang~ Chang~ Kachang~ Chang~"

"Chang~ Chang chang~ Chang chang~ Chang chang chang chang~"

Somebody watching from the side might be wondering, 'what kind of family is this?'

August 9th. On the morning when the sun was barely poking out of the horizon. Rays projecting from between the buildings were still faint, and without the usual ferocity of the current season. Gales blew, carrying away a proper amount of heat from the skin — Indeed it was a weather fitting for sports.

On that morning, the three members of the Touwa Household lined up in the yard and did the radio callisthenics diligently... While adding their own music. Starting from the right were Erio, Me and Meme-san.

Usually hiding in the bed or lying down on the hallway at this time, Meme-san was for some reason awoke this morning, joining us in the exercise. She looked like she spent a night outside, with that tired look, messy hair and untidy shirt.

"Chang~ Chang~ Chang Chang~ Chang~ Chang~ Lala~ Lala~"

Erio performed with a blank look, beginning stretching her arms.

But I was doing my legs, while Meme-san worked her waist.

The three of us occasionally lost our unity. Everyone had forgotten about the

order. After all, the last time me and Erio did this was four years ago, and Meme-san must have been I will say no more.

Despite being sloppy, the warm-up forcibly continued. I've witnessed three times when Meme-san was just doing random things. Looks like she has the tendency of just doing whatever when she forget.

The final breathing part was when all three of us finished together. "Ah. Someone has to go stamp on the card." Meme-san mumbled sleepily and drifted back home. Is she okay?

Well, I question her sanity even when she's awake, so what's the point of asking now?

"Well, let's get ready to go."

"Ready to go~" Erio repeated after me like a little girl. If she's able to put more intonation in her normal speech, she'd be wonderful like a regular human.

I entered before Erio. After taking my sandals off I stopped her with a gesture. "Mmm~" Ignoring her strange growl, I proceeded into the kitchen. I had to give her a wet rag for her feet. The moment I told her to not go out barefoot, she sprinted outside. Unlike a teenager's rebellious phase, it was closer to a child throwing a tantrum.

"I'm grabbing a rag."

"Oh." After a brief exchange with Meme-san, who was washing her face in the kitchen, I returned to the entrance with a dampened rag. "Here." I tossed it to Erio. She grabbed it and, without hiding her resentment, gave two careless scrubs under her feet.

"Clean!"

"No, It's not."

"The galaxy is weeping from your bullying!"

"I see we have graduated from the U.S. now."

I'm the one cleaning the floor this summer, you know. You're more than welcomed to help out, ex-chore helper. Though It will be a disaster if she's responsible for that.

“Sorry for the wait~” Someone was waiting? I turned with the question in mind.

Finished with tidying herself up, Meme-san exited from the kitchen. Her sleepiness disappeared, and she’s even showing her motherliness with foil-wrapped rice balls in her hands; I almost thought it was someone else.

Just FYI, she was actually wearing the attendance card on her neck. Isn’t that the card for collecting points during the spring bread festival?

“Here you are. Lunch. I woke up just to make you this.”

“I will gladly accept it.” I involuntarily answered like a subordinate to a boss.

Maybe it’s because Meme-san was suddenly doing something, so it’s only natural that I was taken aback. Had she changed due to the lack of appearance?

“You have to have lunch if you’re going to play, right? I used to make lots of food for Eri-chan too!”

“It’s true. I spent a whole day eating at the beach.”

Continuing from Meme-san’s recollection, Erio joyfully ascribed the ins-and-out of the story. Was that when Erio was still normal? For her, it was probably one of the most cherished memories.

“Do you want to save it till we’re there?”

“Mm.” Erio nodded while hugging the rice balls carefully. “It’s a bento.” She’s not wrong.

I let Erio, who claimed to have cleaned her feet, put on her shoes. Shoes aren’t meant to be put on her feet, I thought while looking down. I too changed into my shoes and grabbed the key to my padlock from the shelf.

“We’re going now.”

“Going~”

“Now~”

The three of us shared a mysterious greet. Well, mine’s pretty normal, but I felt like I would be considered as one of them anyway. Sad, really.

Once again we exited from the entrance. I headed toward the shed for my

bike. Meme-san mentioned that she wanted to clean the storage during summer, so she asked me to; but I'd completely forgotten about that. Anyway, I moved the bicycle outside into the yard. I've gotten used to it, and now I can actually do a wheelie.

With a dislike for the empty backseat, Erio hopped into her spot in the basket. I still baffle at the mentality. According to Maekawa-san's previous report, her butt hurt. So what does Erio think? Asking if a girl's feet hurt is acceptable, but not so much when it comes to their butt. What a strange world we live in. Hmmm, but do I even see Erio as a girl?

Is it really okay to see my cousin Eri-chan as a girl~? I thought.

I straddled onto the seat, and began the plain, normal routine of saying 'here we go.' 'Go~'

We headed out. But, at that precise moment.

Instead of seeing us off from the door with a 'ride safely~' Meme-san shouted and ran over 'wait~'

Strapped across her back was a bag of unknown content.

"Oh~ I guess I am tagging along after all~"

"Wait, you're coming with us?" My judgement said what you meant was to leave without you.

"I wanna see Erio and Mako-kun play~!"

"Okay I get it, fine — so stop screwing around!" And don't choke my neck!

Meme-san hugged my waist and hopped onto the rack. The bicycle tipped leftward from the impact.

"Whoah, oh~" Even Erio hurriedly held onto the basket's rim.

The long-awaited Touwa trio rode together. Letting Erio and Meme-san sit on the bike, I proceeded to the river side.

Occasionally I want to palm my face for not considering anything wrong with this picture.

Yet, even this sigh of regret seemed to be washed away by the water of

forgetting. With the way things are now, the destruction of doubt is but an issue of time, slowly approaching me.^[55]

Meme-san actually has her own bicycle, so why doesn't she use it?

...I asked myself in the corner of my mind.

Riverbank. During weekends, people were usually seen playing rugby with their kids. Is soccer not that popular with kids now? It's a good thing, I think.

I left my bicycle and walked down the bank. The sun had yet shone onto this riverside field at dawn.

The horizon of the rising sun expanded, casting a shadow on the ground.

A few people were practising defence on the field as warmup. They were the old guys on the shopping district team. Yamamoto-san was among them. Were they finally getting ready for the official game?

Oh, a high school girl was already sitting on the bench of our resting area. A familiar girl, at that.

"Hey~ ya~"

A calming tone and a naïve wave. In a cute casual outfit, she covered her hair with a safety helmet.

Mifune Ryuushi-san beckoned at me. Unless I was wrong, she probably wasn't waving at the Erio a step behind me. Noticing Ryuushi-san's presence, Erio retreated.

I had realized the possibility of being trapped in this pickle between Erio and Ryuushi-san, but I approached the resting area fearlessly. "Yo~" I raised my hand lightly and began probing. "What's going on today?"

"The Onee-san from around told me about the game, so I came here to cheer for Niwa-kun!"

She smiled widely, swinging her dangling legs back and forth. I appreciate her coming all the way here.

After that, a shade cast on Ryuushi-san's smile. The focus of her eyes moved to Erio.

“Uh... Touwa-san too... Um... Good mornin’.”

Despite her stare drifting off, Ryuushi-san greeted Erio courteously.

Why did she hesitate? I guess, from her appearance, Erio does seem more fitting with an English line.

“G-good... Morninging.”

Erio, too, awkwardly responded colloquially. It was probably not because she stuttered that she repeated herself. I think. Then she scanned about, mumbling something she had discovered.

“Mom, is gone.”

Ah, she is. We rode here together, but what happened afterwards escaped me... What a strange incidence that a forty-year old with such conspicuous presence could vanish. I looked up the bank to see if she was there. “Ah.”

Instead I noticed a different creature. The thing riding on a bicycle nimbly in that outfit, though hard to identify from a distance, is undoubtedly Maekawa-san. What a terrifying sight.

If fishes never stop evolving, would they perhaps traverse the land like that?

The creature that got off her bicycle and trod over on her fins... What the hell is that?

Wrapped in an enigmatic costume with a daikon-like colour, Maekawa-san raised her hand (fin).

“Yo, aren’t you early. You too, Ryuushi.”

“I told ya to call me Ryuuko...” Oh man, she’s confused! Even Ryuushi-san was disconcerted.

“Maekawa-san... What, is that?” I asked in lieu of the three of us.

“A dugong.” I’m a mermaid~ She posed after flicking her bangs.

“...” Despite having seeing it once in an aquarium.

Do dugongs have leg fins? No — they don’t even have legs.

“Oi~” At then, shouting came from the field. “Do you want to practice~?”

Yamamoto-san called to us. “I’m coming~” I waved back.

Since Ryuushi-san came for me, I figured the least I could do was to show her my best.

As for the bento, I’ll save till practice is over.

“Can you hold on to this for me?” I rest the rice balls onto Maekawa-san’s fins.

“Sure. Who made these?”

“My aunt.”

I put the baseball cap left on the corner of the bench.

“Here, glove.” Ryuushi-san handed something she casually found to me.

“Thanks.” I put my left hand in it... Isn’t this for the catcher? Whatever.

“Do you best, Niwa-kun~!”

Ryuushi-san waved gently. Yep, that’s how a manager should be.

As for the Miss Fishy who attended to that role prior — as much as I appreciated the food... She’s not the manager, but our mascot.

Now we can say that the Maekawa Dugong is, beyond any doubt, our official mascot; she had transcended from being a fish to a mammal! ...Wait.

“Ryuushi-san, aren’t you supposed to cheer for the city team?” I had to be sure.

“Hey, now~ Did ya already forget, Niwa-kun~?”

She stuck her thumb out and grinned a toothy smile.

“I’m with ya, Niwa-kun!”

She blushed. We blushed too. She said such embarrassing thing in front of all these people we know. Erio looked displeased, and even Maekawa-san... What kind of face was that? She hid in the costume.

“Dang~ now that’s being young~”

“Why must Ryuushi-san also play as the cheering audience?”

“Cuz I’m embarrassed! Like, kaboom!”

I didn’t get it. Flustered, I could not look at the resting area. I ran toward the field to wait for my turn.

“Cousin, is the rice ball good?”

“Hm, it is. What, it’s not like you made it, Erio.”

“I know.” But she’s still glad. As though she herself had been complimented, Erio beamed with a smile.

She really loves her mom. Is it because Meme-san spoils her too much? Or is it because Erio loves her mom so much that she couldn’t help but spoil her? These two are just like the chicken and the egg.

Eating our breakfast together, Erio and I waited for the time to come.

Our opponents were a little late, but they still gathered just enough people before the match. Naturally, Nakajima and Hanazawa-san were among them. Even the space-girl who guards the left field was standing in front of the shopping district team.

...I didn’t consider Yashiro as a threat, since she’s never done anything exceptional. Similar to me, she’s just there to fill the number.

“Rice ball~”

“Falling down~” [\[56\]](#)

Ryuushi-san and Maekawa-san watched me and Erio eat. We couldn’t finish all this food, so I raised one

The dugong passed out from the intense exercise. Being able to make it here was already a miracle on its own. I’m not just kidding — I am genuinely concerned for the human being known as Maekawa-san, since she already struggles so much living as one.

Perhaps due to the food being made by her mother, Erio attempted to stuff them in her mouth. “Urgh.” You’re a light weight, so don’t be so reckless. it’d be terrible if your glove catches something out of your mouth instead.

In any case, we’re fed and ready. Everyone on the shopping district team besides Maekawa dad gathered.

“Where’s your dad?” I asked the daughter.

“He ran off from the pressure.” She calmly stated, rousing the crowd. Who’s going to pitch now?

When the noise failed to cease, before the game started, ‘she’ walked over from the river. With what itinerary did it result with her coming from there? I don’t want to know. But we came from the same house, using the same bike, and she somehow ended up there. Did she take a long route?

Touwa Meme-san made her debut in a different outfit.

“What are you wearing?”

“Hmhm~ I changed by the river. Ah~ What a shame, Mako-kun! You could have seen me change if you went there! Is your libido radar working, young man?!”

“I think it’s working just fine.” Since I successfully ignored you.

“Wahahah! I almost thought I had no chance of appearing now that it’s almost ending, so I struck first! If the final boss of a crappy game isn’t as tenacious as I am, he is just a waste of pixels!”

The words pouring out of Meme-san’s mouth were largely broken, echoing loudly. Meme-san, who had returned, changed into a baseball uniform. From what school is that from?



'The words pouring out of Meme-san's mouth were largely broken, echoing loudly. Meme-san, who had returned, changed into a baseball uniform. From what school is that from?'

Must have been what was in that bag, but more fundamentally: how did she get it?

"And so, I gave up on being the beautiful manager, and am now the beautiful coach!"

"You've misplaced the 'gave up' there."

This person... She's more of a 'forty-years old ★' than a 'forty-years old.'

"Mm~ I don't really know much about the rules in baseball, but I guess I will work on cheering everyone up!"

There's really only one person who'd get cheered up by her in this team: the rocket guy. I glanced over, seeing him staring obliviously at Meme-san. I dread the ageing of eyes.

Maekawa-san came to my side; I rudely pointed at the laughing Meme-san and asked.

"The hell is wrong with her?"

"Uh~ A surprise?"

"This is too much."

"Ahahah." What a phony laugh. "Nothing wrong with a little fun before the festival, right?"

Maekawa-san is too good at adapting. And what kind of festival is this? I know the saying 'a party starts in the morning,' but I guarantee you that it never works in real life.

"Team, gather up!"

The self-named beautiful coach knocked on the bench and summon everyone.

"This is everyone, coach."

Let's observe for now. There were folks who aren't kids who still need the

reminder.

“But Maekawa ain’t here.”

“Yeah~ So who’s pitchin’?”

“Are we lettin’ the youngins throw?”

“Who played baseball here?”

“If only it’s croquet.”

“Or pool.”

“This ain’t sumthing’ you can do just because it’s a ball!”

“Ah~ah~ Please quiet down, everyone.”

Meme-san suppressed the adults’ clamouring and focused their attention.

Rather, the team didn’t express any apparent disdain or disagreement, seeing Meme-san as their coach.

Is this alright? Setting the nervous Yamamoto-san aside, as I the only one who’s fatigued and generally pessimistic?

Erio, on the other hand, admired her mother who had undertaken the role of leader.

Meme-san scanned to confirm our undivided attention, nodding satisfyingly. Even with the referee shouting at us to line up, our coach paid him no mind.

Ryuushi-san, who had backed off after the uproar, returned to me and whispered.

“Isn’t that Mochi-mochi sensei?”

“Hm.” I almost asked ‘who’s that?’ “That’s Erio’s mom.”

“So she’s Niwa-kun’s Aunt... I have to call her Oba-sama!”

“She’ll kill you for that, so you shouldn’t.” And why the honorific?

Meme-san coughed, adjusting her tone before speaking out.

“Ahem, listen up, everyone!”

“That’s from a different genre.” [\[57\]](#)

“Mako-kun has a soft spot for a girl’s aroma. Keep a close eye on him for your socks.”

“I’m so going to kill you.”

See? I was right. I’m no god of death, yet all of my most unfortunate premonition came true. Actually, since I live with Meme-san, there’s something that bothered me.

“I have a question, coach.” I raised my arm for permission to speak.

“Okay, Mako-kun is coming clean.”

Is it really something I can come clean to? Unless she’s implying something else?

“You usually complain about extended coverage for baseball on TV: do you really know how to play baseball?”

“If we’re talking about passion, then I won’t lose to anyone!”

“Where’s the passion in that?! Shouldn’t we be more worried now?!”

“Hey! You’re sitting out for talking back to your coach, Mako-kun! Or better yet, you’re going to become my chair!”

“Are you the devil?!” Or a brat?!

“Setting that aside, coach, we have a bigger problem.” Maekawa dugong stepped up as the advisor.

“Mm, and what could that be, cutie part-timer?” Part time? For what?

“We’ve ran into a serious problem: there’s a severe lack of pitchers after my dad left.”

“Pitchers...? Why do we need water for baseball?”

“We don’t need you either!”

“Then, we can have Eri-chan play as that pitcher thing!”

“What~?!” How did that lead to this?!

“The coach’s orders are absolute~! Listen up: get in line!”

Our overly-reliable coach booted us out. Like bees swarming out of a fallen

hive, we scrambled onto the field. Our steps were thing in ‘a line.’

Shoved into a position by her mother who had no understanding of, Erio almost literally foamed herself. [58]

“You got this, Ace!” I nudged her forward. “Wuwuwu...” Her face was pale as though pushed into a river: “D-do you want to switch, cousin?” “Sorry, but I only do football.” A long time ago, anyway. Besides, I actually thought that having Erio as the pitcher might work unexpectedly well. I seriously doubt that Meme-san had any thoughts other than ‘my kid is the best’ though.

Erio looked like she was about to go steal a futon from somewhere; I dragged her as we joined the shopping district team. The city team was already in a line, and — not just annoyed — downright furious waiting for us. Couldn’t be helped. Falling in line with Meme-san’s logic, she’d insist it’s ‘Operation Ganryuu-jima.’ [59]

I faced Yashiro when we lined up. Did she have that mysteriously confident smug inside that helmet? I felt our gaze meeting.

The man playing as the referee declared ‘game start.’

We bowed. As my head lowered, I caught a glance of Nakajima — he was smiling.

Let’s do this! I clenched my fist unwittingly.

Going second, the players of the shopping district spread in the field. Coming to our defensive positions, we checked where the sun was as well as the condition of the ground. Even the adults seemed slightly more serious than before. And Erio was, indeed, the pitcher.

She quivered, like a baby deer, atop the pitcher’s mound.

But she’s the only one.

I’d stopped counting after our eighth consecutive defeat.

We’ve been on a losing streak.

This time, things weren’t as simple.

It’s going to be a critical battle.

Defeat x Youth x Denpa — the game will unveil here. [\[60\]](#)

“Too bad, Mako-kun is just a backup.”

“What? I thought you were kidding.”

“Game start!”

“You’re seriously going to sit on me?!”

Actually sitting in the resting area, I asked Meme-san about my mission. Well, I mean, I know I wouldn’t be much help anyway, but Ryuushi-san came all the way here for me.

Now I won’t have to embarrass myself — It was, in some way, a type of salvation.

“I would like you, Mako-kun, to go look for the missing dad of Maekawa.”

The coach’s order was to search for our Ace. “Oh...” I shook my head ambiguously... Wait, I’m going to look for Maekawa dad? Face to face?

“Maekawa-chan is going to cover for you when you’re gone.”

Right there~ Maekawa-san pointed at the dugong standing at first base, like she’s looking at a fish in a water tank. Even with the fin stuffed in her glove, she insisted on wearing the outfit. I didn’t know you can play in that getup — goes to show how lax the rules are for the game. If anyone had a problem, we can retort with the space suit too. Was that why nobody said a thing? Um, I digress.

“Why me? Isn’t it easier to have his daughter do that instead?”

And it’s ‘me.’ Having me, whom Maekawa dad was already wary of, find him would only exacerbate the misunderstanding.

“Mm~” Meme-san looked over to the field, smiling like a mother. I didn’t know precisely what of it seemed that way, yet her cheeks and eyes had the same delineation as many other mothers would have.

“Because, if you were to go...”

“If I were to go?”

“It would be quite interesting.”

“...Look.”

She’s actually hoping things would get worse. How could she say something so childish with an expression like that? But that’s part of Meme-san’s ‘charm~’ Could you not fill in the blank for me?!

“You don’t want to?”

“It’d be a pain.”

“No way, no how?”

“Yep.”

“Everyone~ Mako-kun could sniff her aunt’s bed sheet, but he can’t look for his friend’s dad. What an honest —“

“Okay I get it! Please, let me look for him.” Feels like this damn joke will stick with me forever.

And I will never forgive the me from April.

“I just love that part of Mako-kun~”

“And I must surrender to that part of you, Oba-san...” My heart had signalled defeat.

“First thing first: there’re a few spots where Maekawa-chan’s dad would be.”

“That is, quite helpful...” Hold up, is this guy a frequent escapee?

Meme-san gestured (and most of that unhelpful) and explained to me Maekawa dad’s escape. There’s a few I’d never been to, but I didn’t really have a choice. As for why Meme-san knew where he went, I pretended to never have the question.

Even if the question was delved into, there probably won’t be another convincing reason other than ‘cuz, she’s Meme-san.’ That’s the type of person my aunt is — and I’m not complimenting her.

Still, looking for someone... Was it necessary to have me do that? I mean, there’s no denying that if I were to run off, the team wouldn’t take too much of a hit, but... Is running an errand better than sitting on the bench?

“Speaking of which, that soft-cheeked cutie there looks upset. I wonder

what's wrong?"

With me in the middle, Meme-san stared at a bored-looking Ryuushi-san. Soft-cheeked cutie... She does look that from the side. What a spot-on nickname from Meme-san. I wanted to poke her face.

"I'm here to see Niwa-kun play."

Yet he's not playing~ Ryuuko is troubled~! She said so with a distraught look.

"Fufufu, just you watch. Mako-kun will be back at when we need him the most, and he'll show 'em."

Not just toward Ryuushi-san, but also me, Meme-san comforted us so.

"So before then, just sit and wait." I thought you're the coach though?

"Um, I dunno much about baseball. Ya just smack the ball far, right?"

"That's correct." I interrupted.

"Mm, mm." As though affected, Meme-san too nodded.

"And, if ya hit someone standing you're out."

"...Right." That sounds a little problematic though.

"And ya switch after nine people are out!"

"This isn't darts."

Man~ I got up from the bench and skimmed the field once.

Erio and the catcher guy were having a secret discussion on the pitcher's mound. Only, Erio was looking down at the cover of her 'Intro to Baseball.'

"What can ya throw?"

"Mm, ball."

"No, no, what I mean is..."

"Remote, pizza, rags, books. No telescopes... Mm?"

"Stay sharp~!"

I won't claim that that's what they said, but the catcher dashed back to the outside of the infield with hopeless gaits.

Setting the book down where the talc powder bags would be on the mound, she shouted flatly “Uwoh~” to raise moral, before throwing out the first pitch to Nakamura-san.

Alongside with a deflating yell, the ball flying out of Erio’s hand traced out a fittingly-flat trajectory. Having to hit Maekawa dad’s fast pitches for so long, however, this proved to be challenging to hit. Without adjusting his speed, Nakamura-san swung the bat early. The missed swing threw him off balance; the ball landed into the catcher’s glove.

“Kyah~ Eri-chan is so cool~!”!

Meme-san bounced around in the resting area with a bit — my bad, a very shrill voice, cheering her daughter. Embarrassed as she was, Erio, her long haired tied into a tail exiting from the back of the baseball cap, still smiled bashfully at her mother’s voice. She seemed more relaxed now.

...It took me that much effort to squeeze out a peep, yet Meme-san easily cheered for Erio. Her voice was ridiculously loud. Her courageousness was truly amazing. I stared, in awe, at the coach who hopped as though still doing her radio callisthenics, Was it that? The way you lose things with skills when you get older? I’m not quite there yet.

The only thing left inside was regret.

Erio faced the second batter Nakajima with the same slow-speed. But that wasn’t the only thing: aside from her velocity, Erio had perfect control of the ball. That somehow became our ace in the sleeve.

I guess so, huh. Cringe surged before any sign of being impressed.

She was able to accomplish to strange act of ‘tossing a pizza to the futon roll’s upper part.’ She might have learned the proper stance from then. From the standpoint of the basics though, it’s quite the annoying kind, like those meaningless special training in a sports manga.

Looks like it’s applicable for even amateur baseball.

Despite the lack of speed, it had control.

‘Counter strength with grace:’ it’s a quality often attached onto the

protagonists of recent baseball manga.

Or I guess it's already been done before, like a certain manga with hands held high or some Lycaon teams.^[61]

"...You can do it."

Toward a trembling Erio, I voiced out my support that likely never reached her.

Then I walked toward the bicycle parked on top of the bank.

Unable to become a hero, I once again could only struggle on the side of the stage.

It's both a search for the missing Maekawa dad, as well as a time to buffer for myself.

If I take a little more time, I might even miss the entire game. It's not like I would be doing that intentionally.

Even if someone came to cheer me on, I can't meet their expectation — so I 'gave up'. I could even say I was 'forced into it.' No matter how anyone says it, I have impeccable excuses.

I was a backup when I played football, and there's nothing I could do to escape my parents' eyes. With that in mind, I suppose I am luckier this time around.

My opponent was Hanazawa-san. Playing will just embarrass me. I don't practise every day like Ryuushi-san — despite the both of us being backups, it's just not possible.

So I'll run. It's the big game today, so there's no next time, right? Give up now, and Ryuushi-san will never get the chance to watch me again.

You've always been complacent, haven't you?

Let's say you got the chance to play back then, did you have the gall to say you will be kicking some ass? You'll just fail more miserably in a physical sense, in front of your parents, would you not? Being a benchwarmer was just a hideout someone else set up for you. You're just given an easier way out this time now that you're older.

Isn't that right, Mr. Niwa?

I tried to convince the last of the neurons in my head, droning on the revelation I've just received.

I indeed listened and assented quietly to this lecture to myself.

“.....”

Even so, I pedalled till sweat drenched me on this cool morning.

While wondering where my thought should go, I arrived at the third location.

Following a shambling Maekawa dad, I slowed down to avoid getting ahead, as well as to appear less menacing.

Truth to be told, I already found him, but he'd been running away. Things had been like this for a quite a while.

Maekawa dad was just about to enter one of the locations, the theatre next to the manga café in front of the station; after discovering me, he disappeared almost as soon as my mouth opened. Chasing after him was my only choice.

At the moment, Maekawa dad toiled up the hill that Ryuushi-san and I often part at, where the sky bridge is. He climbed, breathless, as though he might vomit at any moment.

People might mistake him as a boxer put under a weight loss regime, and I the specialist riding on a bike placed to train him.

“Wh... why are you following me~?”

Holding his scattered breathes, he inquired behind him.

“Uh, cuz you're running, so...”

“I'm not running. I'm just doing a little soul searching~!”

“What are you going to find around where you live?”

Phew~ Phew! Even with different intermit, Maekawa dad and I exhaled the same kind of air.

Nausea plastered my skull, and my head hurt even more. The battle had commenced on the riverside, yet here I am sweating somewhere else. With that

being one of the reason, I almost passed out.

On top of the bridge, at the tolling station, Maekawa dad collapsed.

“This... This is more tiring... Than the game...”

“Me... Too...”

I dropped next to Maekawa dad on my bike. The below and arm rubbed painfully against the asphalt road, yet nothing else delighted me more than lying still. The contrast between my burning flesh and the slight warmth in the road almost gave me the impression that it was comfortable.

“Are... Are you sure it’s fine for you to be here...?”

Turning from face up to face down, Maekawa dad moaned a question. I worried that the passers-by would mistake us as a father and a son passing out from the heat.

“I... I’m the bench... Your daughter, is filling-in for me.”

The dugong that must be the star of a certain aquarium must be out playing on the field as the one-day player (like a one-day director). Oi~! Guys~! Let’s go back to the river now! ...Calm down, me. Come on now, brain cells.

“Is... Is that right? My daughter’s... Pitchin’?”

“No, Erio’s pitching... You’re our ace, sir, yet you ran off.”

And making me come get you all the way out here. As though matching the descriptor ‘rise and shine,’ the sun roasted us on top of the bridge. If we were to lose consciousness, we’d probably dream about being grilled.

“How rude... It’s because... it’s the official game that I’m carefully planning out my game.”

“Weren’t you about to head into the theatre...?”

“That wasn’t... Hold on. Let’s catch our breathes first.”

“Yes.” To solve the difficulty that was not having even the air to say a simple phrase, I shut my mouth and repeatedly breathed deeply.

The wind blew more violently than usual on the bridge; the air we so needed was more than abundant. Only, it was hot almost to a point of burning even the

mouth and the nostril. In no time my throat dried, and my eyes painful. I don't know if it's just me, but my face hurts whenever I'm dehydrated.

While the problem of hydration has surfaced, our breathing had reached a point where we could be less than unsightly.

We both got up and sat on the rocks on the bridge. "You good?" "Yep."

Perhaps Maekawa dad was staring at me with the idea that I'm his daughter's something, his gazes were pointed.

That reminded me of the football coach I had.

"So why exactly are you here?"

"I'm here to get you back, sir."

"I don't wanna!"

Maekawa dad followed the cars passing by and refused. His fingers curled up, making him look like a girl too shy to speak.

"That girl's pitch is too good! We ain't winnin' that!"

"For the most part I agree." Makes me wonder that she's in the wrong story.

"Think about it from my shoes: I have to play against someone like that! We're gonna lose anyway, yet I have to keep pitchin'! And if we lose, it's my fault as the pitcher! I've had enough."

Maekawa dad expanded his arms and stuck his chest forward, as if releasing something. Battered by the wind, his lanky form almost fell back into the road. If a car drove by then, Maekawa dad would need an ambulance and actually say bye-bye to the river bank.

"No one is saying it's anyone's fault." Everyone's mostly good folks.

"But I bet they're all taking behind my back..." What a persecution complex.

In the back, huh...? I wondered around the time, too, that everyone's secretly bullying me, and the coach wanted to keep the group together and knowingly disallowed me to play.

"But that's exactly what the other pitcher is thinking."

“Hah?”

“Hanazawa-san too said her team is always losing.”

Did he know who Hanazawa-san is? I used the name anyway. Maekawa dad probably recognized who that is from earlier, and he grumbled. “Is that right... I guess it’s hard for her too when there’s lotsa folks above her.”

The adult expressed his sympathy in a tone that sounded as though a shared sentiment.

“Why does the girl wanna play amateur baseball?”

“Probably to vent.”

“Oh, I see. That’s great. So where do I go to vent?”

Shifting his focus onto the tolling station’s electronic voice, Maekawa dad mumbled to himself.

My ears, however, were captivated by the sound of the zephyr. The atmosphere rumbled, sweeping like waves hitting against the sandy beach. Sweat dried gradually from the breeze; I closed my eyes and breathed.

What to say... Not that there’s many choices. Only a few words can be used, and there’s only one truly fitting.

Quoting is such a convenient thing.

“Hanazawa-san even said that if she were to play, the team always think they have a chance of winning, that’s why she hates playing.”

Maekawa dad looked back. “Now that’s something I’d rather worry about.”

“Same here... But, that’s not so bad either, don’t you think?”

“...Hm?”

“That’s basically saying, when you’re playing, sir, we have the same kind of hope.”

Maekawa dad’s expression twisted into a lopsided one. It’s the type that can only be done subconsciously.

I’ve never thought I could use this phrase to describe something other than

the battle with the enemies of the world.^[62]

“Like, even if you’re sure that people can never fly on a bicycle...”

I paused here, letting out an awkward laughter from my dried throat.

But I was certain with my next line.

“Yet you can never say that making people think they can fly is definitely a bad thing.

The ever-so-familiar aqua-blue particles danced inside in my eyes.

My lachrymal glands hardened, preventing the sort of reminiscing sentiment from flowing out.

Well done! I congratulated while looking skyward.

“There is no question that you're the one holding the team up, sir.”

You might not be the shiniest, but you've always been the best. So far, we haven't had a game with such big gaps between scores.

“I...”

I've always admired you, standing on that mound.

The words that followed tumbled in my mouth, and was swallowed with the wind.

The main character.

A talent recognized by all.

A hero.

I, too, wanted to be someone like that.

But I've given up on the hardship.

To be acknowledged, it's the only way.

Maekawa dad sniffed. He wasn't moved to tear or anything, right? I took notice, but it would appear to be that something just flew into his nose. Well, then don't suck it in! I backed off a few steps. Without noticing me, Maekawa dad stood up, tidied his sloppy shirt and brushed off the sweat dripping from his hair.

“I dunno why, but I've always been running away.”

It's the same as I: I've never forgotten why, though.

“The only things I didn't run away from are when I proposed, when I decided to open a bar, and when I fought with my wife about the name of our daughter.”

“.....”

Maekawa-san's name, huh... It's yet to be revealed. Does it contain some earth-shattering secret in it?

Hmm~ Maybe she's actually called Maekawa San?

As if dragging my slipping focus back from the mystery, Maekawa dad's glance pierced my temple.

“That's why I'm here to check on my escape route.”

“Hm?”

“Even if I were to go there now, it's not my problem if we don't make it.”

He apparently gave up on running. It's great that he's convinced, but...

“Oh yea, I guess that's true.” We spent quite sometimes running around.

The game might already be over. If that's the case, I... I will find a bat.

And play some baseball with Ryuushi-san, right? Okay, that settles it.

...Even so.

I peeked at Maekawa dad; hint of anxiety flashed.

Even if I drag him back, can he play? He looked terrible.

Maekawa dad drifted onto my bike rack and held onto my waist.

Another dark spot stained my bike's history.

Forty years old, space suit, my friend's dad. There are plenty of 'high school girls' around, so what's the deal?

“So, what are you to my daughter?”

Maekawa dad murmured behind my shoulder. The chill shot up my spine.

“Uh, um... Just a normal cosplay buddy.”

“Don't you lie to me, boy!”

He jabbed my waist. I ain't lying... Okay yeah that was a lie I guess.

If he could just accept that with a 'yeah, I thought so,' then he wouldn't be Maekawa dad! But setting that strange assumption aside.

“Ahh it hurts~” I moaned while pushing the bike forward. My legs are also shaking from fatigue.

“You better come clean if we win the game!”

“Ahh~ Yeah, yeah, I will.” He wants to win now, isn't that something?

If I were to be completely honest... I've been to your daughter's room before, and naturally it was just the two of us, hahah... Now we'll switch role — I will do the running away.

For some reason I pictured not just Maekawa dad, but also Ryuushi-san coming after me. What am I, the phantom thief?

“But, I did try to run away... Won't the guys be mad at me? They're not going to beat me up, are they?”

There he goes freaking out again.

“I want to puke my hands out.”

“What does that even mean?”

It's already hot and humid like in a sauna, please don't throw in the mopy thoughts.

So... “It's a-okay!”

I rung the bell, laughing off the idea with a cheerful attitude.

Because...

“Heroes only show up at the last moment!”

When we returned, the game's already at the second half of the fourth innings. We were losing, 0 to 2.

Erio's control ensured that the other team could never get four fouls. In other

words, they'd gotten use to her slow flying ball. Still, being able to maintain the score difference at two was quite impressive. I have the confidence of losing five points in one round as the pitcher.

I scanned — we're now offence, with people on first, second base and one out. It would appear that those were not hits, but rather errors and walks. Standing on first base spacing out was Erio.

Ah, we saw each other. She waved, so I did the same with the thought of 'job well done!' to compliment her work so far. Too bad she won't receive all that information.

And then, as though attracted by our back-and-forth, Meme-san, noticing me and Maekawa dad's return, turned around and rested the aluminium bat from her shoulder. She welcomed us with a benevolent smile.

“Looks like I won't be substituting today.”

“Coach, aren't you having too much action?”

“Mako-kun, substitute batter.”

“Wha?”

She just piled all the responsibilities on someone who just came back.

Billboards pointing toward the road of heroes rose everywhere.

With a jubilant voice, Meme-san called out to the umpire standing at the batter's box.

“Hey~ Umpire, our Mako-kun is now the hero, so let him in!”

“Um...” I was going to say there's no such role in baseball.

“You came back at the best time, Mako-kun.”

“Oh, um...” I had no words. I didn't know how to act or what to do.

An anxiety bloated, like being called to the staff room from the school intercom unexpectedly.

“You too — you're playing next innings, so go um... Do what... Right, go turn your shoulders or something.”

Like a professional coach in speech and behaviour, Meme-san directed Maekawa dad. “Got it.” Though defiant in look, Maekawa dad heeded to her order and retrieved his glove.

Then she gently nudged my chest.

“Isn't this the best time to go? Go win a game for us now.”

The aluminium bat she hugged was placed softly into my right hand.

“...Um~” I wanted to say something, but I wasn't sure where it would go. As I stood conflicted, Ryuushi-san, standing next to me, patted on my shoulder. What was it? Before I could turn and face her — “I'm rootin' for ya~! Ni~ Wa~ Kun~!!”

“My... Ear...”

The exploding cheer erupting next to my face delivered a direct impact into my brain.

“Wuwu, I'm sho embarrassed...”

She paid no mind to the others' painful reaction. I expected no less from a young girl: being bashful was almost her job... Hold on.

“Um, you should be a little further away before yelling.”

“Whacha sayin'! Ya can't hear if I'm not closer!”

I heard it so well, that my cochlea rung still.

Wanting to shut the part that thought 'I don't wanna be cheered,' I sighed.

“...Fine, I get it.”

I get it; my grip tightened on the bat.

Hoshimiya Yashiro.

I will face it directly.

“Be safe~”

“Yeah, yeah~”

Who was that just spoke? Meme-san? Or Ryuushi-san? Well, either is fine with me.

Having any one cheering for an eternal bench warmer — I should really be laughing.

One out; runners on first and second. On this moment that is only a step away from two outs with full bases.

Step forward, toward the unknown of 0.00000000198 centimetre per second.

“...Alright!”

With the bat resting on my shoulder, I sped ahead.

Finally, I will chase after that with a speed that can never reach. From now.

Again, and again.

This time.

“I guess I'll go for a little home run!”

Standing on the batting zone with the bat still on my shoulder, I adjusted my feet.

First time betting today, and I'm afraid there will not be a second. If I don't score here, we lose.

I'd be lying if I said that I wasn't nervous with this scenario.

My gaze pitted against Hanazawa-san's. Her defence at this river bank wasn't just on the level of impressive — she could even be a little cocky about it.

Dust blew into my eyes, and I rubbed. It's windy today. Sure would be great if I could have the wind make my ball into a home run. Unfortunately that won't be the case. Without bleachers of some sort, the distance for a home run is far too long — it would be quite difficult with my strength and skills.

Despite wanting to get our runners back, it would be hard to even send the ball to the outfield. Ultimately I reseated my helmet and raised the bat, sending a glance at Nakajima's courtesy smile on second base.

Hiding under her cap without movement, Erio stared holes into me. She wasn't preparing to run, as though conveying her plan to simply walk to home base. Hey now, I grinned bitterly.

On the left field, Yashiro too stood still with arms crossed — 'why doncha

show me?' — she seemed to say. Perhaps she already knew that the ball won't fly toward her. What's strange is that the ball typically flies to her — I felt I've seen this scene in a manga.

The tiny fruition of being destroyed and outed was, for some reason, the gradual understanding of Hanazawa-san's play.

I cannot read the future, nor do I have any powers, so I rely on my own ability to win. I haven't wasted the last twenty or so chances I had to strike back. Since I have yet remembered the feeling of a hit, I still have spaces for memory: I saw the pattern in Hanazawa-san's pitch.

Still, I was not certain. What's crucial is that it is only one ball. If I had the ability to comprehend the entirety without any data, I would have long been in a team.

The first pitch. The only ball of any possibility. I know the type of pitch Hanazawa-san throws.

A straight, slightly toward the lower end of middle. That's Hanazawa-san's favourite spot. Usually she aims there, toward the end of the strike zone where it is hard to see. It's the only chance I have.

As usual, Hanazawa-san raised her arm. Since few actually make it onto base, I do not have enough experience of her typical stance. But I can only swing.

The ball exited from Hanazawa-san's hand. I believed it will come, and began putting all strength into the bat.

Here it is!

My muscles trembled.

Though I swung as soon as the ball came, I was too late.

My kinetic vision isn't too outstanding. I guess I don't have the talent for baseball?

Still.

Just for now — just for once.

Even without that talent, I need the result.

As if but of naturally, the bat I held too far out in anticipation of a hit moved too late. Yet.

Like clinging onto a clothe with a finger nail.

Like never letting go of someone else's hands.

Like betting eighty years of life to fill five centimetres worth of distance.

My bat caught the escaping ball on its lower right.

Between where my jaws meet creaked; as if to answer the bulging eyes, the sound of blood vessels clenching emitted from the temples, and sweat exploded from my back. Never wanting to let go of this sensation, I moved even my legs, firming planting myself.

“\$#%\$&!!”

From my mouth came a deep groan straight from the depth of hell.

I bit down, as if trying to encapsulate the death rattle from escaping between my teeth.

Time stopped as though to capture the moment when the bat struck the ball. The sight of the ball changing shape, bending inward reflected in my eyes. How heavy. The weighty sensation spread across my hands. Between the flesh of my fingers and the bat, nails dug in deeply, their form almost lost. It hurt.

I couldn't swing the bat out. The ball was still glued on. I bit down further; crack, the teeth slip apart, and the goosebumps popped out. My scalp twitched, as if the hair had fallen out.

Once more, I applied more pressure onto the teeth that were on brink of breaking; keep going, move those arms more.

And then.

The grey arc created from the aluminium bat drew across, sending the ball flying.

It should have been an impossible sequence.

The speed of sound arrived later than all other.

For the first time, the metallic bat echoed a resounding hit.

A field of white painted my vision, like being embraced by Yashiro's hair. This too was only for a moment.

In the sight that returned, I could not see my accomplishment.

Numbness from my arms tightened my expression; I followed the path of the ball. Where? I ditched the bat, running forward with legs that almost tied up. More, sprint forward. The wind deafened me, and the cheer far away.

Hanazawa-san's eyes expanded, shocked. Terrific! A short-lived pleasure lifted the corner of my lips. A comeback against a pro. The football on the ground. A short time passed before I let go of the almost crazed glee.

Where is the ball? I turned toward where people's foci were at.

There it was.

The white ball flew toward the right field. Hit by a late swing, the ball did not have momentum carrying forward. It merely floated in the sky, in the direction it was hit.

It would probably land immediately into the right fielder's hand as soon as it loses even that. The old guy with the crooked shoulder guarding that field was casually getting ready, standing below the ball.

“...Ah.”

The disappointment was worse than expected, and I almost stopped going.

I sprinted with numbed hands. In the end, it's still just a ball? Not even a sacrifice fly. It was still dubious if it'd make a difference: simply put, it might as well be a freebie.

Hanazawa-san sighed, looking down at the mound and flattening the sand. So she'd already predicted the ending. The sense of defeat sank, dragging my feet into the ground.

Only Yashiro, standing in the left field, followed the ball with her eyes.

As if she was filled with conviction.

To have an enemy who trusted me the most.

And almost as though guided by her, I did not look toward Erio, but further

into the sky.

“Ah.”

A gale blew from behind.

My eyes grew.

Something that forced everyone's attention back in the sky happened.

The wind carried the ball away, since it was so high up. Even Hanazawa-san had to crack open her eyes away from the mound to follow the ball. The scale immediately tipped in favour of the shopping district's team.

The right fielder frantically lowered his hand and ran backward. Staring at the ball, he showed no sign of stopping. Don't stop. Don't stop now.

I restrained myself from running toward the ball while eyes still fixed on it.

Though in a diametrically different position than the rocket scientists, we share the same wishes.

Fly, fly, and fly higher.

It inched forward as it fell.

The destination of the ball.

Plastered against the boundary line — the side of the river flowed.

“Ah... Ah... Ah...”

The resting area was pretty far away — the gasp from there played hopscotch in my ears. I prayed, unsure if my footing was even proper. I prayed, and prayed. Please, just five more centimetres.

Please grant me the miracle travelling at five cm per second.

And then—

And,

And.

“Ah—!”

The ball so luckily blown away by the wind was not baptised, but simply

landed in the river.

“It's a little off from my prediction.”

“Is that how you're covering your embarrassment?”

Dugongkawa-san, who welcomed me, slapped my back. After circling the entire field gleefully, I was received with cheers. The adults crudely rubbed my head; to the celebration I grinned painfully. Despite being jabbed and shoved about, it wasn't unpleasant.

There were two more innings after this game. The other side were already demoralized, however.

Okay, we will definitely win. We'll bet everything on Maekawa dad's right arm. “Right?”

I directed the conversation at Maekawa dad, who stayed a step away from the centre of the raucosity. He must have been keeping distance from the other adults because he ran off.

“Looks like we're gonna win, so I'll try and keep up.”

A not so friendly, circumventing way of saying he'll try his best. “And ya better not forget about my daughter!” To his additional comment, I could only smile vaguely.

“From henceforth, Niwa-kun will be known as Miracle-kun!”

Ryuushi-san's words were frequently incomprehensible when she speaks excitedly. And so she gave me an unfitting name. I would hate it if she starts calling me that tomorrow, I thought. I'm the type to get nervous when I say a long sentence, however, so I refrained.

Erio raised both hands to her shoulders and smiled admiringly.

Like a child sharing a victorious moment after a successful prank.

“Cousin, very cool~”

“...Thanks.” That's all I could do.

I slapped my hands together; though not of many words, we traded our blessings.

It was a result from coincidence and extraordinary luck; when people congratulated me, the embarrassment grew as well.

Still, I kept my head up.

Coach Meme-san waited at the end of the line. A face full of smile, she stood ahead of me as if blocking my path.

“I expected no less from the lessons of a famous coach.”

“Please don't flatter yourself pretending someone else said that.” Yes, there goes the water. It's settled.

Meme-san's face erased the indescribable feelings in my mind.

So be it. I quietly observed with a grin. It was, after all, a miracle achieved by something other than just my own power.

Help me spread the same accomplishment to my other aides.

“And so~ Time for the goddess' reward!”

“Is that the short hand for the goddess of ricefishes?”

“Smooch.” My face was kissed. “...” “Smoooch~” It's being sucked. In the plebian world, this was known as a kiss... “Uwahhhhhh!”

“Wha04:31, 25 December 2016 (CET)!”

“HeyzWei (talk) 04:31, 25 December 2016 (CET)!”

“Kyah.”

“Whoa.”

The last two people were too calm!

●人生初のホームラン。	+4
●ついでに初チュー。	-5
<hr/>	
現在の青春ポイント合計	+20



Chapter 7 - The Midnight Sun

"Nya~waniwa~ nyowa-kun~!"

The first second, I thought it was just an odd sound that stood out in the noise.

The second second, I was lost in the joy of knowing that this wait was worth some points itself.

It was until the third second that I realized, from the owner of this voice, that I was a part of this.

In other words, I realized whoever called was referring to me.

"Let's meet up at the third street light from the festival's street" — Under this specific location, I peered at the couples in yukata or groups of girls pass by. It was just after dusk.

August 13th, about halfway through the summer break, was the night of the festival.

Niwa Makoto, his goal as the adolescent guy, will never do such disgraceful action as to skip the occasion. Similar, the event of having only guys in a big group walking around the stalls will accent only the sour part of youth.

Unfortunately, that awful taste from a year ago lasted till today.

Even walking alone in the road permeated by the hazy lights of lanterns could have a sort of elegance to it, so it wouldn't be too bad.

Yet, this year, it was the time for the sweet development of meeting with a girl.

The girl who made the promise with me was a girl I hoped from the bottom of my heart — Mifune Ryuuko-san.

It used to be that I was forced to see her after losing a bet... Nah, just kidding.

“Nya~waniwa~nyowa-kun! Sorry if I kept ya waitin'!”

Stepping on the asphalt road with her feet in getas, she trotted over.^[63]

The result of closely inspecting the direction and the atmosphere was that that had to be my name.

“Nah, I just got here.” That's the typical answer, regardless of truth. But since it's a cliché at this point, do people still buy it? I realized that it actually doesn't matter, and moved on from this topic. Reminder that this isn't actually that weightless of a question.

“I don't remember getting a rapper's name.”

“Well, y'know, I thought the same ol' name was getting a lil stale and stuff~”

Clad in her festival outfit of blue yukata with a teal sash, Ryuushi-san answered bashfully. Having a brain capable of thinking such an astonishing name, her fluffiness is simply wonderful~ (oblivious mode still engaged) If she were Meme-san, than the brain must be about to bloom with flower.

Still, it wasn't part of the promise for Ryuushi-san to be in her yukata — it was a miscalculation I'd gladly accept.

“How's the yukata?” She pulled the sleeves up and inquired about my thought.

“Marvelous!” I complemented with a thumbs-up. Ryuushi-san's face lit up.

I'm just talking about the yukata, not whoever was wearing it~ Albeit not something I often do, I almost had the impulse to tease her. If I just said 'cute,' would Ryuushi-san be upset? Or embarrassed?

“I went to borrow the neighbour Onee-san's yukata, and had her help me put it on.”

Oh, that tiny Onee-san? How old is she anyway?

“I see... But, why the helmet?”

“My hair's actin' up.”

She adjusted the hat. Aw, she's worried about her straight hair? Not like anything's wrong with it. It's also weird to have it on.

“Now I'm ready for that beam attack from above!”

“What's the point of that attack if a helmet could block it?”

It's still cute in its own way... Hm, love sees no fault.

“Mm~”

Ryuushi-san retracted her smile and looked left and right.

“What's wrong?”

“Uh, um, I was just thinking that we can't see the moon tonight.”

She was obviously looking at the sides of the road.

As though sidestepping my question, she beamed again.

“Well, let's go have some fun!”

“Whoa.” Ryuushi-san circled behind me, 'there, there!' and pushed on my back. Am I a Mikoshi? I wouldn't mind just hugging Ryuushi-san (redacted).^[64]

“Mm? Ya have an interesting smell, Niwa-kun.”

“I put on a lotta bug repellent.” Your speech is just as interesting.

With that happy humming from behind as the BGM, I looked up toward the night sky.

Indeed, the moon was not present. That might be better, I recalled in the daze.

Without any wind throughout the day, there wasn't a shard of cloud in the sky either now. I feel cooler than during the day, yet warmer than in the morning. With the right preparation against the bugs, the climate's entering a tolerable phase.

Yet as we entered the street of the shopping district, the heat coming off from the iron plates almost tricked me into thinking it's the rain season again. The smell of grilled food pervaded in the air too: it was the smell of dried sauce. “I really like this smell.”

Leaving my back and walking on my side, Ryuushi-san exaggeratedly stuck her sniffing nose out. I laughed; Ryuushi-san too bloomed a smile. It was a slightly embarrassing exchange.

“Fruitarians don't eat grilled squids or takoyaki, do they?”^[65]

“Well~ Soba with a little less meat is fine. I can also do candied apple, eggettes, also cotton candies... Otherwise...” She looked toward the neatly-placed stands. “Ah, goldfishing also sounds pretty good.”

Since it followed a list of foods, I almost agreed with the thought 'Oh, so she can eat goldfishes too?’ Meanwhile, I remembered a street performer swallowing an entire goldfish.

“Feels like a lotta of our classmates came too”

“Yeah.” I saw a few while waiting.

“If somebody saw us, y'know, wouldn't it be a little... Y'knyow?”

Ryuushi-san acted all embarrassed; even her gait followed, shrivelling up like her body.

“What do you mean?”

“Umm, like, 'Niwa-kun you cutie~' 'Ryuuko is a hoe~' Ya know?” ^[66]

“.....” I'm even more confused now.

In other words, people might mistake our relationship if they saw us?

But we already eat lunch together, so now is a little...

“What if Mikki saw us?”

Why not just have her take a picture as commemoration? Ah, speaking of that... I took my phone out to check the time... Should be enough time.

“Mmm, is there something you need to keep an eye on for?”

“That's my line: you've been looking for something, right? Like someone?”

I dodged the question. Could it be Nakajima? No way. Or rather, can that guy even come? Perhaps the shopping district's victory also meant the city folks will have a harder time showing up.

Having her suspicious behaviour pointed out, Ryuushi-san let out a manga-like chuckle and looked down sheepishly. Has she given up? She didn't make an excuse.

“Well, I was just wondering that, maybe, ya wanted to hang out with Touwa-san for the festival... So maybe she was around... Kuhaha.”

Why did she laugh like a gang boss? It's a sunny and oddly cute tone. If it were Ryuushi-san, even a 'Kuhaha' or 'Kekehehehaha' befitting only for a gangster wouldn't be unpleasant.

Yet this Ryuushi-san doesn't seem like she could handle Erio. I'm likely part of the reason, so I couldn't just say anything... As far as I know anyway. I could be just thinking too much.

“Erio is with Meme-san... Her mom, for the festival.”

“Oh~ Is she? Touwa-san and her mom...” Why did she seem so happy?

Compared to before, her smile had widened. Her cheeks, mouth and eyes almost popped out to make a happy expression. Yet to that countenance, I could only grin awkwardly.

Well, she did hit the nail on the head; thus, I changed the topic and looked to the stands lined on the side. It's a little petty how my sight always drifted to the price tag.

“What do you want? It's on me.”

“Eh?”

“Think of it as celebrating for your big game.”

“What!” Ryuushi-san hopped a little. Is my generosity really that far-fetched? Is there something to my usual behaviour I need to re-evaluate on?

“I am deeply indebted to you.” She bowed down and thanked me in an old-fashioned manner.

“Don't be. Well, what do you fancy?” I asked while moving closer to the food stands.

Ryuushi-san would probably stop by in front of whatever she wanted. So I handed the decision-making to her while moving ahead. The smell intensified.. More precisely, since we closed in, the originally-mixed smell now each distinguished themselves. The aroma of heated sugar and soy sauce tingled my growling guts.

With her finger tip, Ryuushi-san tickling with tapped my shoulder.

“I'mma go with the candied apple.”

“Hm.” I nodded in a very Erio-esque way. “Well, let's get one.”

Peeking into the targeted stand, Ryuushi-san smiled warmly and gestured a finger at the old lady inside.

“I would like one... Ah, would you like one too, Niwa-kun?”

“I'm okay.”

“Okie dokie~ Just one please.”

The number did change halfway through the conversation, but I didn't think it's something to be mindful of.

“Here ya go~ Come again~” Like someone working at a super market, the old lady took the money from me. 300 yen per pop. I thought it was 50 yen before, from the stand in front of the train station. This must be what is known as the festival price.

At about her third bite, Ryuushi-san paused.

“It's a little embarrassing with ya staring.”

“Is it? Guess I will keep staring.”

“Wuu. Ya are gonna be like that, huh. Niwa-kun is surprisingly mean~”

We grinned jovially at one another. Submerged in the festivity, we savoured the relaxing atmosphere.

Even the old lady over by the stand smiled, affected by us.

Since Ryuushi-san began eating, I waited quietly while looking around.

I noticed a familiar face in the crowd. Her pale skin stood out and was easily picked up.

Ooi... Tooe-san? The owner of the hair salon, with her daughter on her shoulder, passed by. Was the man on her side the husband? We're not exactly close enough to warrant a hello, so I merely watched.

The girl sitting on her shoulders, was she worried from being so high? She

shrivelled and shrunk onto her mother's head.

Mouth ajar, she seemed to be whining, though the distance between us meant it wasn't clearly heard.

“Wanna bite? Niwa-kun.”

Ryuushi-san passed the half-eaten candy to me. It was such an innocent act that I actually recoiled from the confusion. It's an indirect kiss no matter how you look at it: is it really okay? I don't even think Ryuushi-san herself was completely aware of anything of the sort.

Is it really okay to just do this when I had my guard down? I had this meaningless, chivalrous thought. Perhaps I had some subtle feeling of guilt.

“N-no thanks.” Wavered, I painfully turned her down. “Tch.” Ryuushi-san smilingly tutted and returned the candy. See no evil, hear no evil... Not. Hm. Hmm.

In the end only I regretted. Am I lacking something in terms of moral? Or is this actually normal for a high school teenager?

During my struggle, Ryuushi-san finished her apple. “Shoulda walked around.” She just now said it. Was she maybe sorry for making me wait?

“Why not? We can take our time.”

Plus we didn't have anything specific to do for this festival anyway. I guess there is the fireworks. “Oh yeah, thanks for treating me.” Ryuushi-san clasped her hands and thanked me and the old lady.

“”Thank you.”” We both waved our hands in unison. That's a little saddening.

The leftover chopstick was taken away by the shop keep.

Looking at the scene, I took my phone out to check the time. Wouldn't want to be late.

“Okay, Niwa-kun's next.”

As we returned to the crowd, Ryuushi-san said something interesting.

“Eh?” I genuinely felt a little disgusted at myself after imitating her.

“A present for your home run! I'll treat ya!”

Ryuushi-san pulled her sleeve up and for some reason showed her biceps. Trying to show her reliableness? "...Really?" Ryuushi-san's treating me? Well, I'm not that surprised.

Still, I was truly overjoyed.

"Thanks. I'll take you up on that."

"Yeah! C'mon~ What ya fancy?"

Like a TV show's lady, she hurried me.

"Hm!..." What's better? I scanned around while looking for something that struck me.

Then, my sight landed on that booth. I suppose most folks passing by would have looked again just to make sure.

"Anyone buying? Anyone~?"

A female wearing an eel costume, selling a grilled version of her kins... How fitting.

Felt like something you might find in a theme park. Is there even an eel park?

"Yo~ Unagikawa-san."^[67]

We visited that stall in order to chat with Maekawa-san, busy skewering the eels.

Drenching with sweat, Maekawa-san seemed like she would pass out at any given time.

Hearing us, she looked up. Her usual smug was complete covered by the costume.

Actually, that might even be a gill costume. I thought.

"Transfer student and Ryuushi? That's an expected line-up."

What an unnecessary comment. Asking me to change myself... With the final destination being Meme-san, though, I'm very hesitant.

"I told ya it's Ryuuko. Maekawa-san, are ya... working~?"

A little scared, Ryuushi-san asked. "A payless job." She seemed to say so self-

mockingly.

“I'm helping out my family stall. Re-heat the packaged eels, and sell them off 500 yen each.”

“Ah, that reminds me of what I use to have in the elementary school lunch. It's something we'd have near the end of semester.”

Ryuushi-san nodded, as though comprehending. With a blank face, Maekawa-san focused on her hands without looking up at Ryuushi-san. It was then I realized that, perhaps, her quietness was result from the dizzying heat. She's wobbling too.

“500 yen huh, that's not exactly even with the apple.”

“That's fine! Ryuuko Onee-san will spoil ya!”

“Then, I will gladly accept.” And run straight up into her bosom... The difficulty in this world was not being able to do what you want.

With fingers pinching the skewer sticks, Maekawa-san continued spacing out.

“Still, eel suits you.”

“Rice eel and congers are up my alley too.” Ah, there's a reflexive reaction from her drifting eyes.

“Moray eels seems passable too.”

As long as it's skinny and lengthy it'll work. Even earth worms or crickets... Ah, is that no good?

“Niwa-kun, would ya like the eels?”

As expected for a fruitarian to be discontent with my decision. But, um, from a friend's position, that should be the expected thing to do, I thought.

“Hm, can I?”

“Yep. One skewer, please.”

Thank you~ Maekawa-san mumbled listlessly and picked up a finished skewer from the corner. She passed it to Ryuushi-san. I watched the two hands in contact. Maekawa-san's hands were white and long, and a bit rough. Ryuushi-san's were like children's, smooth and without flaws.

People's hands reflect their lives. How do my hands look?

Ryuushi-san took the food, and passed the eel skewer to me like a flower.

“Here, Nya~ Nyaa~ Niwa... Wait? Who?”

“Wha~ Are you the amnesiac main character now?” Actually, even if that wasn't a spontaneous event I'd be terrified.

“Oh no. What did I call ya? Nyawa~niwawa...”

“Just the normal, please.” Also, the correct answer is Nyawaniwa~Nyowa... Hm?

I transformed into a troubled girl. “Mmmm.” I received the food from a grumbling Ryuushi-san.

“Actually, I'll take one more. This one is on me.” I ordered another one in realization.

“Are ya really that hungry, Niwa-kun? Or are ya a slimey-lover?”

“Well, I guess the former is more correct.” Actually, Ryuushi-san hadn't pay yet, had she?

The current Maekawa-san might even let us go if we didn't pay.

Yet as we chatted on, Maekawa-san's face changed dramatically: light returned to her face. Though glaring, her eyes had focused onto me.

Oh hoh! Unagikawa-san had came back from the dead. Truth to be told, however, it's already a miracle that she's alive above ground during this season. I guess from that angle Maekawa-san isn't too different from the eels.

“Heh~” She grinned, eyes squinting, as though noticing something. “I see.”

“What do you see?”

“Nah, I just caught on something when I see you add another order.”

“W-what are you babbling about?! Secret?! Are you a certain detective?!”

“People call me the frail, and pretty smart Maekawa-san.”^[68]

She stretched her eyes, making them as big as possible in display of her power. Then she immediately faltered, 'ugh, my head hurts from yelling...' and

kneeled down. Intelligence aside, her brain doesn't seem too durable.

But she probably did notice from just that exchange. Impressive, her observation and ability to connect the dots.

If the next volume were to be made into a mystery novel starring Maekawa-san as the protagonist, I wouldn't be too shocked. After all, I feel like I would become the first victim before the big reveal.

“Intercept~!” For some reason Ryuushi-san interrupted. Her skilful arms pushed me back.

“Why did you shove me out of the frame?”

“On a tactical standpoint, we're currently doing a 1 on 1. Excuse me.”

“Why?”

“Cuz my summer has just begun!”

What good would it do making this the last volume? I don't have much backup.

“Five, hundred, yen!”

Without a doubt, she passed the five coins in her hand in front of a recovered Maekawa-san.

“Then me too...”

When I planned to pay for the second eel, Unagikawa-san's head wobbled as if snickering.

“Hehehe, just Ryuushi's five hundred is fine. And the other one... Right, think of it as your inaugural gift.”

Uwah, she knew. “I told ya to call me Ryuuko~ So what are ya on about?”

“Not telling. Also, please call me Maekawa the Clairvoyant.”

“Thanks for that then. I'll pay you back in banana cake rolls, so let's call it even.”

“Sure but... Isn't that kind of rare in a super market?”

“Hey~ Hey~ What are ya two saying? Don't just leave me out~! Ryuuko-san

shoots beams from her hands when she's all alone~” That's not normal for human.

“I'll explain on the way.”

Taking the second skewer from Unagikawa-san, I distanced myself from the booth. I don't belong in that cruel world where a moment of being seen-through would be the death of one, so I chose escape.

Well, since it's Maekawa-san, she might just collapse without anyone watching, so I'm a little worried.

“Thank you very much~ Hope you have a wonderful night.”

Under the watchful eyes of Maekawa-san, whose ability to voice returned, we mixed into the people.

“So, what was that about~?” Mildly upset, Ryuushi-san started throwing tantrum like a child unable to follow her friends' conversation.

“I'll have ya explain till I'm satisfied! Explain ya self, dangit!”

She jabbed with her elbow multiple time in my sides. Coach, this is cheating.

Yet there is not coach in life. I must, therefore, decide what was right on my own.

“Money can't buy lives, yet here I am using currency to purchase the part of an eel. I am beyond condemned... Maekawa-san saw through me.”

I scared even myself with the unending lies. For a moment I even thought maybe a spirit had possessed me. Bon festival is just around the corner, too, so that must be why.^[69]

“So that's what's troubling ya... Ah! A foreshadowing of Niwa-kun's fruitarian route!”

Our colourful Ryuushi-san seemed to have understood something she shouldn't have.

I have been dreading the next time when I will be dragged into another vegetarian buffet.

Nevertheless, the ridiculous story seemed to have amended Ryuushi-san's

discontent.

Despite the fragments of guilt laid about my feet.

What's left is not flowers in each hands, but an eel in both.

Now that's a headache — I can't hold my girlfriend's hand if both hands are filled! I wish I could be in a position to think like so. So far the only female I've held hands with since coming here... Meme-san. The only female to have sat behind me on a bike... Meme-san. Someone who hugged me on her own... Meme-san. A kiss on my cheek... Meme-gahhhhhhhhhhhh!

A nuclear war waged through my youth. The apocalypse came. Looking from the outside sucks. Aside from hand-holding, everything had been taken by my aunt. Is she the devil following me? Instead of the succubus of every guy's dream?

As I continue the motion of moving my feet forward with Maekawa-san-like dead fish eyes. “Ah.”

“What?”

“It's Hanazawa-san.” I purposefully did not name the male next to him.

With shades and a cap on, like a sneaky celebrity, the inadvertently-made-conspicuous Hanazawa-san & Nakajima were looking at something at a booth. The items they seemed to be looking at appeared to be accessories.

They must have came here in disguise because they lost the game.

“Do city people not want to come now?”

I mumbled my doubt. Though unexpectant, a response came from the side.

“Mm~ I guess. Some people do care a lot.”

“But you're here, Ryuushi-san.”

“Well~ y'know, I did say I'm with ya!”

With that bashful yet happy look, she tossed me words that made me secretly joyful.

Then she added the line of 'And I told ya I'm Ryuuko~' I was even more elated.

I turned around abruptly.

The place we passed filled with bliss and footsteps, like candies had rained from the sky.

Only a part of this town celebrated the festivities tonight.

Yet, so many came.

“How do I put this.” I turned my head back to report the sentiment permeating in my chest.

“Mm.”

“There's so many people here — I'm a little moved.

Afternoons in the summer. The roads were never so full of life.

But now, the emotions people poured in here might just become a river of its own.

“It is really cool~”

As if expressing how genuine she was, Ryuushi-san nodded deeply.

“Also.”

With a bit of accent, she smiled meaningfully and looked up to my face. Those eyes looked like they saw something worth praising, making me blush. Unsure of her intention, I did not know what to say, only able to squeeze a twisted smile.

“Ahaha!” She thought my reaction funny.

Then, Ryuushi-san hopped into the road like she did last time in the rain.

She landed in the middle, stretching her arms as far out as she could.



'She landed in the middle, stretching her arms as far out as she could.'

“Everything here~! It's all on ya, Niwa-kun!”

“...Eh?”

Being treated like the saviour of the planet was less embarrassing and more baffling.

“Me? No, no, I'm run the shops or anything, neither am I running the events, right?”

“But, if ya didn't hit that home run, we won't be having the festival here.”

“Oh, yeah.” That's true.

The ace I once dreamed of becoming.

Once I became it, I realized how flimsy the position was, and could not felt completely glad.

I guess not having the basics down is still not good.

Because of the occasion. Because of luck, I got it without using real abilities.

I can't be placed in the same category as Ryuushi-san, who worked so hard to where she was.

...Still, no other values other than self-satisfaction embody this so-called 'cause.'

Call it what you like — talent, hard work, or fortune.

Only, after the results, there is no such thing as choosing what the means was.

Just like no matter how assiduous I was, I could never participate in a football game.

Even so.

What else can I do but assent? I am, after all, the best at 'giving up.'

“That's right~! I AM the mastermind behind the festival~!”

I tried to be an idiot in the crowd. Surprising felt great throwing away your shame.

“Whoa~! Niwa-kun's the hero of the galaxy~! Land of Light~!”^[70]

We both flailed our arms like birds with their wings.

Perhaps it wasn't Ryuushi-san's intent, but I'm afraid we're... Considered as brainless couples in the eyes of the passers-by.

“But that home run must also be why some people can't come now.” I sulked.

“Who cares about that?”

Go away~ Looked like she just threw the entire thing out.

“Ya became a hero this summer, Niwa-kun!”

Heheh! Ryuushi-san proudly thrust her chest forward like she's the star.

“Well, a hero on a small scale. Like, 'the neighbour who's really good at baseball' tier.”

“So what! The hero of this town can change the world little by little!”

Seemingly throwing an entire something out, Ryuushi-san praised me with arms raised.

Summer-only hero... huh.

First, I would like to change the condition of 'the only intimacy comes from my aunt.'

That aside.

The world might be like so now because of a piece of pebble you kicked on the road long ago.

When the wind blows, the barrel merchant gets rich. Butterfly Effect Fish Story. ^[71]

The words that I should have ignored long ago emerged once again.

Furthermore, they stepped into my future with a taunting smile.

“...Now that's annoying.”

Having to bend to those words.

With arms out on the sides still, Ryuushi-san skipped back.

“So, Mr. Hero, when do you plan on staying till?”

“Uh, yeah, um, actually...” I stuttered. No, it will only worsen if I stop now. With a breath, I determined to finish.

“I have a little rendezvous after this.”

One who chases two hares shall get neither.

I know! Please don't remind me of that now!

Rendezvous. As the words exit my mouth, Ryuushi-san froze. However.

“Niwa-kun.”

Like having a high class chocolate hanging from her lips, she called my name with a bright grin.

Cold sweat formed on my back from the illusion of having hot iron branded on me.

“I won't ask ya who you're meeting up with. I prefer the slow strangulation by cotton, but...”

“Gulp.” This was neither acting nor playing along — I genuinely could not breath.

Ryuushi-san thrust her index finger forward; the nail poked the tip of my nose.

“Ya owe me one hundred.”

“...Yes.”

“Plus interest.”

“I'll do my best.”

Mhm, Ryuushi-san nodded approvingly... But she still ran off like that time in the rain while crying, 'wuah! I lied! I'm really useless! I couldn't even try to be mad!’ Until her silhouette faded into the night, I watched her go; I sighed, angrily rubbing my bangs.

...I'll receive divine retribution one day for doing such a terrible thing. I'll find Ryuushi-san later and apologise to her more.

But, there was nothing I could do about a promise made during same time... I suppose it's not something I could just wave off by saying that. But, well, it is the only way the me now knows.

To be on time, I passed through the road filled with booths leading to the shrine.

It took quite some effort to pass the crowd: I'm not as good at cutting in as someone from the basketball club.

Ascend the ladder; Touwa Erio awaited in front of the shrine. Meme-san was not seen anywhere.

Though I felt there would be five or six people hiding in the bush or behind the offering box, I made it to Erio without springing any such traps.

Wearing her usual outfit, Erio emitted the smell of bug repellent we sprayed on each others before heading out.

“Cousin, you came.”

As if expressing her affection, she shook my right arm as hard as she could. It hurt.

“Of course: I promised I'd come. Where's Meme-san?”

“She went to buy a ton of snacks and takoyaki, then left to Tamura Obaa-chan's. She wanted a festival for just two.”

“Really.” Her usual behaviour came back to bite her, huh.

But since she herself seem happy, I guess no one could stop her either.

“So, why did you want me here at this time?”

“Secret.”

“Really? I'm going to see the fireworks then.”

I returned (combination of turning and returning). “Wu~! Wu~!” Erio grabbed my arm and pinched. It's gonna bruise. Let go, my cousin.

“Okay, okay! I'm just messing with you, so let go!”

“Wu~” Perhaps distrustful of me, she kept her grip.

“Is something going to happen? What's going to happen?”

“A little more.” Without checking the time, Erio asserted.

“Fine, we'll wait.” Going back now would also be... Seeing what happened with Ryuushi-san.

“Mm.” Finally assured, she let go of my flesh.

“Have this while we wait.”

“Mm?”

Erio stiffly received the grilled eel I passed over.

“The late inaugural gift, said Maekawa-san.”

I ended up putting it that way, instead of saying I bought it for her.

“Maekawa...” Erio looked to the corner of her eyes in rumination. Couldn't put the name on a face?

“The giant girl who spent a night at your house.”

“Oh~” She seemed to understand, knocking her fist on her palm several times.

Erio then raised the skewer parallel to her eyes; with a 'thank' she bowed toward the lights of the festival.

We decided to sit within the shrine while waiting for Erio's much-anticipated time.

Only cicada cries could be heard, perhaps because woods surrounded us. The usually irritating sound now made the festival more exciting. That's a laughable sentiment.

“It's so much cooler up here.”

Away from the people, the steam, and the bulbs, the night retained its original form.

The sight of festivities below was actually not bad for atmosphere.

“Nom!” Erio bit into the eel while nodding; she looked at the sky meanwhile.

The moment she's waiting for must be related to an astronomical

phenomenon.

“You don't have binoculars today.”

“Nope.”

She shook her head. “Delicious.” Apparently also content with the taste.

The... Stars?

I never thought if I liked or hated it. In other words, I'm not interested.

The correct response should be neither like nor hate. But actually, is that an answer?

Before I could reply, Erio popped off.

“It's here!”

Still holding the bamboo sticks from the finished food, Erio sprinted out.

She stopped in the middle of the shrine, and then turned her head around.

I followed; I stood next to her.

“Something you want to see?”

“Mm!”

Since nothing else concrete came out of her mouth, I sought the hints in the sky.

In about a minute, I too saw the thing that cut through the sky.

“Comet?”

“Yep. The Perseids.”^[72]

“This is the most prolific meteor shower during the summer, the others include...”

She seemed to be saying something, but it sounded mostly like self-mumbling. The rest of the words were unheard from the excitement of the sight.

“...Oh, I see.”

I finally understood.

A meteor shower.

Erio wanted to join the baseball game because she wanted to see it from here during the night.

Riding the coat tail of festivals, she was able to stay after curfew. Basically, she took the long way around to not defy her mother.

And this must be the best place to see the shower. I finally realized.

I remember hearing this from one of Erio's star gazing lectures.

On a windless day close to a new moon, it is the best for meteor shower viewing due to the lack of moonlight and atmospheric movement. Maybe Erio does have good luck... Or perhaps the universe had embraced her.

She gawked at the night sky — this must be what she looked forward to the most.

“Everything we've done this summer seems like the side dish for tonight.”

We should be glad if we could see a star pass every two minutes.

It definitely wasn't anything dramatic, yet Erio, as though in love with the stars, was drunk in the sight.

At the spur of the moment, I pulled away from Erio.

From that spot, I stared at her. Head lowered, she seemed to pray.

“...Wow~”

Regretfully, the aqua-blue girl watching the stars looked very much like a painting.

Filled with molecules and mystery, the scene had all the rights to be the final curtain of the festival night.

“Hey, now. Don't lose your head.” I palmed my face.

With a bitter grin, I continued gazing into the show.

There was still time before the fireworks.

Playing baseball and watching the stars was correct for this summer.

...Yet, it was still early for a change of scenery.

Like spreading the curtain that slowly descends onto the stage.

Something crawled out from beneath the eaves.

The story did not end there.

“Good evening from beneath the shrine. Call me Belowthe Eaves.”

So she finally admitted it? And I knew she would show up in front of us again.

How dense is she?

The final boss could, of course, judge where my story was going.

“I've known your fate here since the dawn of time.”

Hoshimiya Yashiro.

“Your being here was predetermined.”

She was wearing neither the space suit nor Meme-san's blouse, but a white yukata that was probably borrowed from the shrine. I might not have known where she got the outfit, but it looked like an inauspicious burial dress. She donned even that infamous helmet, bringing her level of dubiousity up to the level of burglars.

If Erio were to scream out, 'Ah~! A thief!' people would likely side with her.

“P-hew.”

“Don't pause between breaths too.”

“Hmhmhmhm.”

Yashiro stood up shakily, unconcerned with the dirtied clothes and assumed her stance.

Then she threw her helmet off.

“Hold it.” She tossed it to Erio; she caught it without looking away from the sky. It would appear she's reveled in the stars and completely uninterested in the Yashiro.

Though I could not deny the possibility of her outright purposefully ignoring Yashiro. That's the right kind of attitude.

Hehe~ Yashio smirked at the sight and spoke.

“I was going to skip town from this troublesome job, but I changed my mind.”

“Wha?”

“Well, why don't I show you a bit of my power.”

“Oh man...” Here we go again.

“But before then, back up three steps.”

“Why?”

“Why don't you just show me!” I spoke maliciously.

Just like when we first met, the request remain unchanged.

Only, Yashiro agreed with my request. “Fine.”

With lips titled, she seemed to convey her anticipation for those words.

...That reminded me about last week.

She promised to show me her powers.

“You once said, what is the point of just believing, correct?”

I did. Subconsciously, I nodded.

As if hypnotised, I was sucked into her mien.

“Have all five of your senses remember, what believing does.”

Then.

Yashiro.

“Hello! And Goodbye!”



'Raising her stick-like arm, she seemingly summoned something.'

Raising her stick-like arm, she seemingly summoned something.

Then, the fireworks bloomed in the sky.

The blinding, yet mesmerizing vestiges of black powder.

A red as striking as the tomatoes.

It's the fireworks. The depiction of summer uncoiled my anxiety.

“What is this?”

That's it? She's not planning on saying that she communicated with the firework technician telepathically, is she?

Disappointment, relief and laughs mixed in my chest; the moment I decided to look back onto Yashiro— In just moments.

From inside the fireworks, something more brilliant entered my vision.

A gigantic orb.

The midnight sun.

A light that stabbed into the eye like a prick.

Then, with the other aurora still glittering, the giant fireball...

It burst with a sound that would entail the end of the world.

Scattered pieces of the stone steps and the summer air exploded in a deafening noise.

I wondered if the sky had fallen down. Or if a miscalibrated had landed. No, maybe lightning was a better fit? The ringing never stopped.

Once I recovered, I had already fallen from the impact.

“Aw...”

A pain both smaller and later than the shock earlier nagged at me.

I looked to the source of the signal, my right arm.

A streak of flesh was missing from the arm; burnt mark traced the indentation.

After scraping my arm, it fell to the ground.

Just that was enough to create such a wound.

“...Ah.”

Rigidly I looked back to inspect the crater.

I couldn't see the object's true form: hidden by the dark of night, the matter did not stand out.

Yet something did indeed fall from the sky.

It came from above.

There was only one thing I could think of.

She couldn't have summoned it, could she?

Yashiro? With that gesture?

Hypothetically, if I had not backed off when I did.

I felt the noise from beneath the temple seem to have grown.

The next firework didn't follow either.

Even Erio, who stood a little away from me, and her gasps became exceptionally audible.

The ringing in my ears persisted.

Lingering images from the moment occupied my vision.

No matter how much time passed.

Afterward, the words that began sprouting out—

Super

Power?

“How is this possible?”

It wasn't a coincidence, a miracle, or destiny. It had nothing to do with me, yet here it is.

Was it her? Telekinesis? Meteor? Rock throw? Star Stream? Home run?

Believe because you have the ability? She's been telling the truth?

If that's the case, her self-proclamation was real? Hoshimiya Yashiro— an esper?

Who was the boy crying wolf?

I tugged at my head, because of the intense noise encroaching in my head.

Even though it was dark, the light that branded itself into my retina danced in algi-like colours.

I sunk into the hallucination that my entire being had been crushed.

The sensation of Youth-Points being shattered into a million pieces.

To seek the truth behind the event, I abruptly looked to the back.

As if only naturally, the girl who summoned the star had already disappeared from the shrine.

“...Ah”

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.

Speech can no longer continue — It's been filled, by the most basic of sounds.

I could not stand up; my face buried into the ground.

Neither did I have the courage to search under the eaves.

The real deal appeared in my face.

I literally couldn't even breath from the confusion.

As though reality had combined with this occasion, the night of festivities and meteors began falling apart.

My vision melted as if acids had poured out of my eyes; cracks filled my vision.

The sight twisted; my ear drums were already crazed. The cicadas screamed, encircling the whirl.

Under the terror, I shut my eyes, only to realize that Earth had turned completely in just two seconds.

In the space devoid of common sense, I could not grasp the proof that it was all but an illusion.

The wound from my arm ached. Drip, drop, it tearfully tugged at my pang.

This is super power! It seemed to scream so; I felt tears forming in my eyes.

Covering it with my left hand, I sensed the wet blood drenching my palm.

“Ah... Ah...”

“Ah.” It ended. The voice that wanted to entail could not exit from the lack of moisture.

My sight was corroded by the lights.

My nose shut by the singed smell of the ground.

My throat silenced by the dryness.

My ears ravaged by the cacophony.

My skin trembled from the blood.

All senses carried with them reverence, and concession to 'that.'

Reality descended upon me.

I could never reach, nor understand that truth.

A small star had crossed the boundary line between super power and coincidence.

After ward.

I still didn't know if it was a strike, or a foul. I could only look up, and stare at the stars in the sky.

●リュウシさんと祭りを満喫。 +3

●隕石に身体と青春ポイントを削られる。 -20

現在の青春ポイント合計 +3



Chapter 8 - How Many Shining Stars Are There?

(Q) Was it telepathy that summoned the meteor here?

(A) More fundamentally, there was no evidence that it was 'summoned.'

(Q) If it were a coincidence, was it possible to have such an accurate timing?

(A) Perhaps it was just dumb luck.

(Q) Why a meteor?

(A) I dunno.

(Q) Highway St*r?

(A) What's that? (TL Notes: A stand from Jojo's Bizarre Adventure, part 4) (Q) Is Hoshimya Yashiro an esper?

(A) Inconclusive from a single incident.

(Q) Is she an alien?

(A) I don't know how to differentiate the two, so I can't say.

(Q) Then what is Hoshimiya Yashiro to herself?

(A) No answer.

The fallen object was a meteor.

The pea-sized rock that embedded itself in the shrine ground created a crater with a diameter over 30 cm.

It seemed to say that shooting stars are not to be looked at.

I dazed through the next five days.

Knocking on the back of my head, I questioned the mind: 'Are you doing your

job?'

The falling meteor became a tiny story on the news tomorrow. On T.V., net, and even radio.

It's an occurrence that many will forget on the following day. Events like someone dying from a fall, or an accidental discovery of a body — if they have nothing to do with us, we easily toss that to the back of our heads after a day. So this is the kind of things shown on T.V? Just something that had nothing to do with people who aren't involved.

Even if it were just for a day, I wouldn't want to be put on camera as 'the first people to find the meteor;' thus I fled the scene with Erio. And because of that, I no longer know what became of it.

Lets say I did stay: it's not like I was going to find a fly from the future or an alien in white tights. (TL Notes: From Earthbound 2) As if it was bound to happen, Hoshimiya Yashiro did not claim herself to be the discover — in fact, I never saw her around since then.

The only thing left were the helmet bestowed to Erio and a scar that will stay with me forever.

There can't be more than a handful of people who's been hit by a meteor.

Obviously it's not 'normal.' Ryuushi-san might be moved to tear by the event.

"....."

I still felt the ringing in my ears.

Oh, one more thing. Erio retrieved half of the rock from the site and brought it back. She said something about making it into a necklace.

Lying in my bed, I changed the T.V channel. Appeared in the screen was a show proving super powers; my fingers stopped. Two boxes, and two people.

It was a test of both x-ray vision and clairvoyance. The man who can see through objects must draw out the appearance of the person inside the box; the woman with 'clairvoyant' as her title, on the other hand, must write down to what degree the man could see her.

It made sense. I understood the purpose of the test, so I began viewing the

experiment. As I stared at the skulls of the audience, a thought went off: "Clairvoyance."

I thought of the possibility that Yashiro's 'power' may not have been telekinesis, but an ability to see into the future. Uh, from the angle of her so-called job, that is.

For example, if Yashiro moved to this planet for vocational reasons — hypothetically speaking, of course — and her job was to save me, who was destined to be killed on that day by a meteor. What if she already knew that, and that was the prevention? Many things make sense if that were the case.

Assuming she predicted the meteor, Erio was the most probable in inviting me to go see the meteor shower; therefore Yashiro went and harassed her. Considering, of course, that Erio could possibly invite me to the shrine.

On the other hand, it's a bit of roundabout if that were the case. Yashiro chose to be involved by playing ball. If the city-side were to win, the festival would have moved, and Erio would have chosen a different place to see the meteor shower, and I by extension would lose connection with the rock.

Well, did she even know Erio that well? I'm doubtful of that. Perhaps she truly just wanted to return the favour to Nakamura-san for the meal.

She once said that she herself was part of the reason why.

In other words, Yashiro's being here and joining the baseball game caused some form of changes in my heart.

And so I hit a homerun and won the game, and ended up at the shrine... Is this what she was alluding to?

So why, then, the roundabout method?

It might be because, according to herself anyway, that having superpowers is too conspicuous of an existence, so by talking ceaselessly about her power, others are less likely to believe her...?

Or maybe because I just don't believe in superpowers in the first place that she couldn't find a way to convince me.

So in the end, she chose to show it to me? Just to throw it in my face?

But, didn't she explain the reason for the spectacle before?

“As thanks for the tomatoes?”

I mumbled while in thought; chuckles escaped my lips: do I seriously believe that the rock had something to do with Hoshimiya Yashiro?

Indeed, she had already declared before. “Meteor, Rock-throw, Star Stream” — not including the last one, the first two are both abilities to control rocks.

Since the very beginning, Hoshimiya Yashiro had talk of meteors hanging around her neck. Magic? Coincidence? Or a power? I cannot prove a thing. Yet, it was not an illusion that scarred my right arm.

As the closest proof, the rock left a laceration on my arm. Perhaps due to my tanning, that thin white line stood out.

“...A punishment?” Not being able to avoid the meteor entirely.

For making a promise with both Erio and Ryuushi-san, as well as hoping I can satisfy both. I truly am sorry for what I did to Ryuushi-san, so if this somehow absolves the issue then I will happily accept.

If I was five cm off, it might have went through my arm. Maybe if I didn't step backward, it would have hit me in the centre mass. Thanks to Yashiro, I was spared from either.

“.....”

It hit me: her joining the game, sleeping underneath the Touwa's eaves, playing with me in the pool... The actions weren't meaningless. Without those events, even if Yashiro were to show up and ordered me to 'back up,' I don't think I would have listened.

To put it another way, what she called a roundabout plan was, from just the results, a success.

Well, these are merely my speculation. I have no way of attaining the right answer. Either way.

“It's too risky to my liking.”

Grumbling to myself, I changed the channel again. Special! How to make

delicious fried steak! Change. Questionnaire show. Change.

Visiting really old people's home. Change. Baseball broadcast. Stop. An unfamiliar team and a team I couldn't care for; one of them won, not sure which.

I shut the screen off. Thinking of which, I have no confidence on how the inner mechanics of a television works. No specific knowledges, just a scratch of the surface. From a typical high schooler's view, it doesn't matter what, any thing could seem like 'magic.' Just how many more mysteries exist inside this cramped room?

Being so clueless, I think I can never defeat the individual known as 'Hoshimiya Yashiro.'

After a little research out of boredom, I learned that Hoshimiya Yashiro was the name of a shrine around the city. The area of the shrine was known for having a record of many fallen meteors.

In other words, it was a pseudonym deliberately used with those statistics in mind. What a dramatic result. Anyone would doubt an alien that started out with introducing herself by name, I guess.

Because having a name sheds a layer of enigma. Just having that tint of realism — if her feet could touch ground, then there is a chance to hold her down. Yet, I've been played.

So I failed to rebuke Hoshimiya Yashiro... No, if I were to dispense that mitigating tone, I would have to admit more than just 'failed...'

It would have been a loss to this battle between us.

I had been annihilated by Hoshimiya Yashiro, utterly and comprehensively.

Being attacked by a rock that might not have been three cm in diameter, my common sense, rationality, and even beliefs— “And I thought I won in the game~”

An honour-less victory — such described the situation perfectly.

I turned with head in hands. Next to my pillow was Erio's stargazing journal. Aside from personal interests, she seemed to have wanted to share her passion

for the stars with me.

“Hmm...” I skimmed. To be frank, the enthusiastically-drawn pictures and records reminded me of Erio's impassioned silhouette more. I couldn't help but smile at the image.

“...Stars, huh.”

I was too hasty to judge Hoshimiya Yashiro's words as an escape from reality. Yet till the very end she perpetuated her way as the right way. I can longer reject her.

In fact, I support her.

I made a wish at the shrine that night. I wanted to see it while having my query affirmed. I said, 'show it to me.'

After that, the so-called superpower wasn't treated as 'fanatic superstition,' 'mysteries' or any such ambiguous concept; it manifested as naturally as it could. On that day, I was guided by Hoshimiya Yashiro toward the meteor-lit sky.

“So lame...” I denied it indiscriminatingly before, and here I am tasting defeat.

The hidden light amid the fireworks dazzled my denial of the unknown. It's not something to be trifled with — it's a thing created to ensure the existence of the human dreams. Still, it is something with the precondition of 'unreachable even with outstretched hands.' To put it differently, it's like your desires in a television.

That said, the pang of touching the television screen after reaching in still nagged at me. Did I feel someone else's 'few centimetre away' ability? The not-so-exciting miracle burned still on my scar.

Just what is the matter with her? My cousin who once again sought the star in the front yard.

Touwa Erio's extraordinary look.

Touwa Erio's blank past.

The me who denied Touwa Erio of her escape.

Was it truly an escape? Was it the right thing to deny the possibility of her contact with the extraterrestrials? Am I fit to be the judge for that?

Just as a powerless person cannot deny a power.

I am no expert of the aliens.

“What a pain~!”

My limit was to vent by throwing a tantrum in bed. Like Meme-san once, or rather everyday, did, I thrashed my limbs about and kicked the dust up.

Just where did the dust that exist quietly yet never appeared to the naked eyes come from?

Whether it'd be dust or rocks, I doubt I can find their origin, no matter how long, with just my 'eyes.'

As I paused for a breath, my phone rang. I put it on the desk — honestly I didn't want to bother, but I still crawled on the floor. Despite the ache from my side, I reached for the phone and held it in my hand. My face burned from sliding onto the floor; I put my phone on the prickling spot.

“This is Touwa... I mean, Niwa.”

“Judging for just that, can I assumed you've finally married?”

“No, I'm just used to the name from home phone... Can I help you, Maekawa-san?”

“Good evening, transfer student. I know it's only been five days, but somehow I'm feeling a little nostalgic.”

Maekawa-san's voice was as usual: Calm and polished. As though capable of cooling down the skin, the stone-like voice soothed my ears; the ringing faded.

“Same here; I wonder why... Well, what do you want?”

“What else? Baseball. You coming for tomorrow's game?”

“Baseball...” The image of an astronaut suit branded in my head. “I'll think about it.”

“Understood. You can reply with a mail, and if you don't, I'll just assume you aren't.”

“Hm... Maekawa-san, uh, I think I probably asked you this before too.”

“Hm?”

“Do you believe in aliens?”

“Nope.”

An immediate response. A wise and timely judgement, so quick that I wonder if I've lost seconds of my consciousness.

“A question with fifty-fifty answers is better answered with the first one, transfer student.”

“...Is that your secret to getting good scores?”

“Heheheh, you're welcome to try.”

With a satisfied laughter, she hung up.

“...Ah.” Sitting on the floor, I let my head fall onto the side of the bed.

If I had to add a few more things onto this meteor event.

There was indeed an unclear sense of awe.

Kind of like playing ten of those movies that can move the entire American population to tears, and then forcing yourself to watch all of them. It's an unfathomable feeling of wonder that follows strange phenomena in the cochlea.

The emotions mixed like a pan of stirred food were stuffed like a sardine can, with nowhere to go.

Screaming with dried throats, in hope of finding the place where they belong in the heart.

Will I be able to feel this scar, one day, when I have everything sorted out? Gingerly, easily, and reverently.

I threw the phone on my pillow. Then I popped the window open with a crisp sound, and looked out. Finally, I peered into the yard.

Protected by the particles, Erio could be seen observing the sky with her star-lit telescope. Perhaps because of my lying in bed, Erio did not fetch me;

naturally I didn't watch Jupiter with her either.

Noticing my gaze, Erio turned the telescope toward me and raised her arm.

“Cousin, want to see the stars?”

Despite being a question, Erio's hands beckoned at me slightly. What did Erio think of the meteor that seemed to have gone astray from the shower?

Just like before, she too chased after the stars today.

I pressed onto my brow, as if trying to block the pus of thoughts from running through my head.

Cough! After swallowing the pressure back into guts several times, I finally replied.

“Coming.” Waving at her, I shut the window. No, Ryuushi-san might text me, so I re-opened the window. I operated the phone, found the text history and sent a simple message of 'I'm going.'

I dropped the phone again, and lied down in a twisted manner.

Hugging the pillow, I squeezed my body toward the centre as much as possible while dying my view with pitch darkness.

Summer this year, just play amateur baseball and watch the sky.

So now, let's go see the stars with Erio in the yard.

And so, I sought for an answer on the other side of the telescope.

The shine that would melt me like that meteor.

And then.

I will hold the metal bat again tomorrow.

Wake up in the morning and march onto the river bank with just a hint of sleepiness.

First, I will pray for something, and focus my sight onto the left field.

The summer will leave me in a daze for a while longer.

To ensure that the boiling head of mine will never calm down.

By the heat.

By the cicadas. By the glimmer of the countless stars shining in the star.

Afterword

To replace an interesting postscript... I will be publishing a continuous novel.

This is number 1:

Not enough money. I noticed the fact as I began suckling on the ice tea after the meal. The colour of the lemon peel stuck onto the glass reminded of the not-so-transparent problem with my wallet. Before entering the store, I seemed to have forgotten the act of checking my funding.

Letting the straw out, I frantically look for my wallet. Inside is a single bill of one thousand yen. The lunch was exactly one thousand yen — without the tax, of course. In other words, I am short fifty yen.

Just fifty. A mere fifty. A single coin, yet impossible to produce out of thin air.

I am flabbergasted: I've no plan this entire life to be involved with the vernaculars of a dine-and-dash.

The tomato pasta had been devoured; the sides bread as well as salad sit in my stomach. Since the only thing that ate the food is my stomach, I simply have to leave that part of me in the store... That's simply out of question. But if the cute register girl tells me to do just that, I might just pass out from fear.

I read about this store in a magazine I picked up, and ended up in here without much thought — my downfall was already in motion then. I blame that magazine. But since I've already threw it in the trash can of a convenient store on the way, I couldn't use it as a rag either.

My nose dried, a sign of panic. To avoid drawing attention, I put the straw back into my mouth and began observing the interior. Lunch time had passed, and the customers gone, yet everyone seemed to be enjoying his or her tea or coffee. My glass, on the other hand, bubbled with my breath.

I had hoped that maybe a fifty yen coin was underneath the table, but all I

saw were my dirty shoes. They won't even be pawned for fifty yen, would they?

Well then, I've thought of several solutions:

1. Escape from the window in the bathroom. It's the worst possible thing. And I don't even know if the bathroom has a window.

2. Utilize my cellular device to call a friend over. Sadly, I don't have one.

3. Ask another customer for some money... Is this the only choice?

Or to split the bill: locate another person whose' bill is also below a thousand yen, and have him split the amount with me. It's mightily difficult, but it's the only idea I could think of. I want to leave apologising to the restaurant as the final resort. Damn my need for appearance.

The candidate after much deliberation was the female sitting behind me to the right. She's appeared in my sight from a while ago, but she sat down only after I've taken a seat; she also only ordered a coffee.

I stand with two arms pushing against the table; after pinching the feet that seemed to want to escape, I steadily and sneakily approached the female... Hey, just go up and ask if you don't have an ulterior motive!

Let's get this out of the way first: ain't no way I am bowing down. I've never struck up a conversation with a stranger. My body trembled in fear. At least it's a bit better than admitting that I'm dining and dashing. Probably. No, definitely.

Courage is not needed if you're in the right. It's to support you at such lame times, does that bravery appear. That's my thought on the matter.

Now is one of such times. I move out with intrepidation. "Scuse me, may I hit on you?"

"Hah?" The female emitted an off-tuned shriek of shock while looking up. I know I'm the one who did it, but this was the absolutely worst way to start a conversation. I belittled myself. The woman put her coffee down, her squinted brows suspecting my intent.

"Um, what I mean is..."

"..."

“So, this way I could...”

“Sorry, I'm busy. Excuse me.”

She apologized twice and squeezed the reason for her escape in between. Someone who was just reading a book while sipping coffee probably doesn't have anything to do with 'busy.' Nevertheless I couldn't muster the thought of persuading her to stay, due to the possibility of her screaming the moment I held her shoulder. Besides, why would I risk more suspicion than just dining and dashing?

The female puts the bag on her arm and races to the register with the check in hand. Though she turns back with a glance, I cannot return the look from shame. The other customers' stares hurt as well. I want to disappear.

I shift my eyes to my feet; something there catches my attention. It's the same magazine that I read earlier.

The female from earlier seems to have forgotten about it, or maybe she left it intentionally. I pick up the colourful papers and crush it without hesitation. The woman in yukata on the cover turned thin like the paper itself.

“Ah~~” I exhaled the last shard of courage. I feel myself deflating from being treated like a goblin. The bravery itself withered, like rotten skin, stuck to the bottom of my heart. No more, I raised my hands up in defeat.

If I come clean, maybe the store will let me go — it is just fifty yen. It's a little sad if I get saved that way, though. Sometimes, kindness is just as lethal as a weapon.

Once again I carefully inspect the content of my wallet. That reminds me: all of my changes were donated to a box in the book store dedicated for service dogs for blind people. I am unsure if that was stupid or not.

I leave the seat, head hanging and eyes staring at the bill. In a speed roughly six times slower than the female from earlier I walk toward the counter. She had already left at this point; the excellent attendant notices my approach and pre-emptively spoke, 'thank you so much~' A hole grew in my stomach.

After reaching the register, I hopelessly stick the bill out and open with a formless start that seem to melt in the seasonal heat.

“Uhh, so uh... I, uh, the money...”

“Oh, that must be this month's issue. Would you like to use the coupon?”

“Huh...?” Issue? I realise that I had been holding that abandoned magazine. “Coupon?” Bewildered, I hand the book to her.

“Thank you very much!” The attendant takes the magazine as though robbing me, swiftly opens the issue and flips through the pages; she then deftly tears the unused coupon from the magazine and re-adjusts the balance on the register.

“Wha-?”

The digits reduced by one. The number froze me on the spot. My vision shrinks; if it were now, my eye balls might just line up with the green electronic symbols.

“The coupon can take off two hundred yen; your total will now be eight hundred and forty yen.”

I feel that the entirety of my life's miracles had been used up by such a stupid thing. Hair stood on my skin.

Light should have filled my eyes, yet the focus will not align. Like a dream, bleary.

I take out the wrinkly thousand-yen bill from my wallet and guidedly hand it to the attendant. She once again energetically retrieves the cash. After tapping on the register, she gives my change.

“One hundred and sixty yen is your change! Thank you very much!”

“...Thanks.” I nod in agreement and take the change and receipt.

And like so, without being censured or kicked out, I leave the store in peace.

After coming outside, I wobble unsafely toward the crowd; I return to the train station.

The remaining one hundred sixty yen ended up in the boxes of the fundraisers asking for donation outside.

Karma truly is a wonderful thing~ I arbitrarily put the sentiment onto the

changes leaving my hands.

The warm summer wind blows through my shirt; the cold sweat disappears from my back.

I stand amidst the crowd, spacing out at the entrance as calm as the eye of a storm and looking into the sky.

That was stupid, I thought.

End

Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ He sure loves Disney
2. ↑ In Japanese folklore, these Bake-danuki, Raccoon dog Yokai, are known to shapeshift into things, especially humans
3. ↑ I'm going to guess it's because Australia is largely flat. Or no one lives there. Or it's mostly desert. Or has spiders
4. ↑ a reference to Dokonjo Gaeru, in which a frog by the name Pyonkichi was squashed by the main character Hiroshi when he trips over a rock. The frog became an imprint on his shirt and commentates on his life
5. ↑ Tengu is a Japanese Yokai. The saying is that what is incomprehensible or unexplainable is caused by the tengu, and should be promptly ignored
6. ↑ A reference to the Pokemon anime. In the OP, Satoshi could be heard exclaiming ポケモン、ゲットだぜ！ Pokemon, get
7. ↑ Shi-ryuu is Ryuushi backward
8. ↑ Referring to Slam Dunk the manga
9. ↑ Original text is Onee-san or something along the line. I thought elder fits just as well though
10. ↑ M*ckey Mouse. Pray I don't get DMCA'd for using that name
11. ↑ Meme-san is acting like Ikura from Sazae-san. The baby is capable of only three phrases
12. ↑ reference to Makoto-chan by Umezu Kazuo. Characters in the manga all greet 'Guwasi' with a hand sign, which is accomplished by holding up only the middle, pinky, and thumb digits
13. ↑ Reference to Batako-san from Anpanman
14. ↑ Radio callisthenic is an activity that was introduced during the 20's in Japan. Children and even adults would get up early in the morning and gather, where a radio will be tuned to play the 'music.' When completed, a card could be brought up to whomever has a stamp so attendance

could be marked

15. ↑ Hanazawa, Katsuo and Nakajima are all characters from Sazae-san. Katsuo 鰹 is the Japanese word for Bonito fish. Hanazawa was, interestingly enough, voiced by Hanazawa Kana in the anime
16. ↑ Someone stop this madman and his references
17. ↑ Koushi-en refers to the baseball stadium at which the national high school baseball tournament is held
18. ↑ a reference to episode 37 of Jack Black
19. ↑ Character Hunter
20. ↑ Oba-con. Having a thing for one's aunt
21. ↑ Referring to The Girl Who Leapt Through Time directed by Hosoda Mamoru
22. ↑ Hashimoto from Sazae-san. The joke is never going to die, is it
23. ↑ Obon is the time when spirits of the ancestors will return to visit their children. The Wasteful Spirit 勿体無いおばけ apparently shows up when someone wastes food or things
24. ↑ From the Ring
25. ↑ Originally 姥桜 was used. It's a type of cherry blossom that doesn't grow leaves till it's flower has fallen. It has both the meaning of a woman's whose beauty has faded, and a woman who has retained her beauty despite aging
26. ↑ Gegege no Kitaro reference
27. ↑ Oba-san = older women or aunt. Obaa-san = old lady
28. ↑ The GRS is a perpetual storm that is visible on the surface of planet Jupiter; it's visibility with consideration with the planet's size indicate the scale of the storm
29. ↑ In Japanese, baseball is called 野球 yakyuu
30. ↑ Not sure how to translate this so I just left it as is. Ryuushi combined doki doki, the expression for heartbeat, and waku waku, for excitement, to make doku, the sound of liquid pouring out
31. ↑ Hanagata Mitsuru from Star of the Giants, a manga series that ran from 1968 to 1971
32. ↑ One of the famous manga artist under the name Fujiko Fujio. Best known for their iconic work Doraemon

33. ↑ From movie “The Mysterians,” in which the aliens' voice is achieved with knocking one's own throat
34. ↑ Referring to MLB Power Pro the game
35. ↑ from MLB Power Pro, Doctor Daijobu
36. ↑ this is referring to Alien Baltan, one of the monsters the classic Ultraman encounters in the original series. His ominous laughter was his trademark
37. ↑ This is a reference to episode 15 of Ultraman 80
38. ↑ 首を洗って待っつけ Literally translate to “wait with neck washed.” It's meant to be a taunt, indicating that the receiving side should be prepared
39. ↑ apparently a quote from Miyazaki film, “My neighbour Totoro”
40. ↑ referring to Final Fantasy
41. ↑ Dragon Ball Z's Saiyans
42. ↑ Common Buddhist chant. In this case could be likened to the phrase 'Have mercy on one's soul.'
43. ↑ Originally a joke that recombines the Japanese word for eave 軒下のきした with 木下 きのした
44. ↑ Translator noted this as surprise attack; looking for the original proverb
45. ↑ A pun on the word 進め forward and なす eggplant. A reference to Crayon Shin-chan
46. ↑ Butterfly Fly effect, the idea that small changes in a large, complex system could have a significant result in its entirety
47. ↑ Dragon Ball Z
48. ↑ Anpan man reference
49. ↑ A table with futon surrounded, and a heat source of some sort installed underneath to keep the legs warm
50. ↑ Dragon Quest reference. Nifuram is a skill that attempts to eradicate the enemies with light
51. ↑ This is from a manga called うちの妻ってどうでしょう by 福満しげゆき. Maekawa-san's outfit here is apparently the wife's outfit on one of the tankoban's cover. The sound effect would appear to be just a thing she does
52. ↑ Mario Kart

53. ↑ The eponymous pose named after John Travolta who starred in Saturday Night Fever
54. ↑ Slam Dunk's Mitsui Hisashi's nickname
55. ↑ The first line is apparently from Kara no Kyoukai, chapter six
56. ↑ A classic Japanese children's story. Search "Rolling rice ball"
57. ↑ According to original text, from Captain Tsubasa
58. ↑ Awawa, the sound effect, is spelt the same way as 泡, bubble or foam
59. ↑ The location of the supposed battle between Miyamoto Musashi and Sasaki Koujiro. Story has it that Miyamoto was late to the duel
60. ↑ Parody of Hunter X Hunter
61. ↑ Manga 'Big Windup' おおきく振りかぶって, and 'One Outs'
62. ↑ Ultraman's Alien Baltan
63. ↑ wooden shoes
64. ↑ Mikoshi神輿 is a form of carriage, or litter, that symbolizes the vehicle of deities, often used in the Shinto religion. It is also present in other Asian cultures
65. ↑ Octopus balls
66. ↑ translated accordingly, don't hurt me
67. ↑ Unagi = eel
68. ↑ Detective Conan
69. ↑ Obon お盆 is a Buddhist tradition to honor ancestors' spirits. It is also a day of family reunion, to visit ancestors' graves as well as to clean them. Days seem to differ in different Asian countries
70. ↑ Ultraman's planet
71. ↑ 風が吹けば桶やが儲かる, Japanese proverb meaning that one minor thing could have a huge impact on something irrelevant; the second part is from movie, Fish Story.
72. ↑ A prolific meteor shower named so because they appear to come from the constellation Perseus. Active during mid July to late August